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RICHARD CALDER: A SPARK IN THE BACKGROUND NOISE, THE REBEL WITH A CLUE

"My books have always polarized the readership.

There are those who enthusiastically embrace them, and there are those who regard them with an unremitting enmity. I am philosophical about this.

Books that possess an idiosyncratic temperament are often faced with an uphill struggle"

INTERVIEWER:
MICHAEL LOHR



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Congratulations, *Interzone*! Two hundred issues, twenty-odd years... It would have been tempting to look back at a time like this, but *Interzone* has always been the most forward looking of the SF magazines and we see no reason to change that now. We know where the magazine's been, what the magazine's done, how many careers it's launched, and so on, so we figure the best way to celebrate this milestone is to forge new paths and launch new careers. So, albeit with a fond acknowledgement of the past and a nod in the direction of people like Richard Calder whose first story publication was in *Interzone*, and to people like Nick Lowe, John Clute and David Langford who are *Interzone* stalwarts – nay, legends – we continue to try to do justice to *Interzone*'s history by seeking out the future.

And let's start doing that in colour, we thought... Well, I hope it's OK. Let us know when you send in your votes for the Readers' Poll, or your subscriptions, or visit the website's discussion forum. Importantly, we have a new distributor who are working very hard with us on increasing *Interzone*'s presence in shops, both here and abroad, and adding things like colour must surely enhance those prospects.

It would've been nice to have 'Hugo Award Winner' emblazoned across this front cover, but in the event we lost out to *Ansible*. However, the Hugo committee did give a well-deserved Special Award to David Pringle in recognition of his massive achievement in getting *Interzone* so far. Congratulations to him too!

Andy Cox



Thanks to Paweł Lewandowski for this issue's cover art

COMING SOON »

John W. Campbell Award Winner Elizabeth Bear with the first of two connected stories 'Wax' and 'Wane'

Other new stories by Dave Hoing, Paul Di Filippo, Will McIntosh, Jessica Reisman, Gareth Lyn Powell, Lauren McLaughlin, Justin Stanchfield, Jeremiah Tolbert, F. Gwynplaine McIntyre...

AND A MAGNIFICENT NEW NOVELLA BY RICHARD CALDER!

INTERZONE 201 » ON SALE IN NOVEMBER

'Wax' and 'Wane' are illustrated by Ian Simmons

BACK ISSUES > CHECK OUR WEBSITE FOR AVAILABILITY AND ORDERING

READERS' POLL

Martin McGrath writes: The Readers' Poll has a long tradition as part of *Interzone's* history. For most of the years that I've subscribed to the magazine readers have sent in their lists of what they liked (and what they didn't) and a list of the most popular stories has been published and discussed. It gives readers a chance to collect their thoughts on the direction the magazine has taken in the previous twelve months and encouraged debate about the quality of the stories being published.

At the same time it tells the *Interzone* editors what their readers like and, uniquely in *Interzone's* case, what they don't like – and in planning a magazine, such feedback is like gold. But, as a simple reader, I have always found the results fascinating. Each year some story I'd found nothing but tedious would soar to the upper reaches of the results, while something else that I'd raved about would find itself near the bottom of the lists (or, worse, consigned to the negative zone of stories that received fewer votes in their favour than votes against). And, sometimes, something I'd really liked – perhaps even a story I'd voted for – would come top or near the top and I'd feel a strange sense of reflected pride in the author's success.

So, one of the first things I wanted to know when the new team arrived was if they planned on continuing the Reader's Poll. They did, and expertly volunteered me to coordinate it! Now is the time for the first Readers' Poll under the new management, but the rules for the poll will remain familiar to long-term subscribers.

The Rules

- You may vote on stories published between issues 194 and the current issue (200) – a list of eligible stories is set out below.
- You may vote for stories you liked and stories you didn't like.

- You may vote for as many or as few stories as you wish.
- We welcome comments as well as votes – but somewhere in your communication please include a clear list of the stories you are voting for or against.
- You may vote by post to:
Martin McGrath, 48 Spooners Drive,
Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL
(please mark envelopes 'Interzone Poll')
Or email: interzonepoll@ntiworld.com
- The results will be published in *tz202* (the first issue of 2006) so make sure your votes arrive before December 1st.

Eligible Stories

- *A World of His Own* (197)
Christopher East
- *Air Cube* (194)
Antony Mann
- *Bastogne V.9* (198)
Christopher East
- *Bird Songs at Eventide* (199)
Nina Allan
- *Cry of the Soul* (195)
David Memmott
- *Dee Dee and the Dumpy Dancers* (197)
Ian Watson & Mike Allen
- *Dreams of the White City* (194)
Jay Lake
- *Ducks in Winter* (196)
Neal Blaikie
- *Enlightenment* (194)
Douglas Smith
- *Enta Geweore* (195)
Nicholas Waller
- *Garp and Geronamid* (199)
Neal Asher
- *Go Tell the Phoenicians* (198)
Matthew Hughes
- *Guadalupe and Hieronymus Bosch* (200)
Rudy Rucker
- *Imagine* (200)
Edward Morris
- *Kivam* (197)
Dave Hoing
- *Lost Things Saved in Boxes* (196)
Deirdre Ruane
- *Piccadilly Circus* (198)
Chris Beckett
- *Problem Project* (195)
Hugh A.D. Spencer
- *Redemption, Drawing Near* (195)
Michael J. Jasper
- *Saving Mars* (200)
Jason Stoddard
- *Soft Apocalypse* (200)
Will McIntosh
- *Someone Else* (194)
Karen D. Fishler
- *Song of the Earth* (194)
Steve Mohn
- *Strings* (200)
David Mace
- *Sunset* (199)
Jay Caselberg
- *The Clockwork Atom Bomb* (198)
Dominic Green
- *The Court of the Beast Emperor* (198)
John Aegard
- *The Emperor of Gondwanaland* (196)
Paul Di Filippo
- *The Face of America* (196)
David Ira Cleary
- *The House of the Beata Virgo* (199)
Steven Mohan, Jr
- *The Kansas Jayhawk vs The Midwestern Monster Squad* (197)
Jeremiah Tolbert
- *Third Day Lights* (200)
Alaya Dawn Johnson
- *This, My Body* (199)
Jeremiah Tolbert
- *Threshold of Perception* (197)
Scott Mackay
- *Totems* (196)
Will McIntosh
- *When You Visit the Magoebaskloof Hotel Be Certain Not to Miss the Samango Monkeys* (195)
Elizabeth Bear
- *Winning Mars* (196)
Jason Stoddard

AS OTHERS SEE US

Quentin Letts displayed SF erudition in an article about tracking John Prescott: 'Like Doctor Who, I could sense the Force was nearby. But where?' (*Daily Mail*)

AS OTHERS SAW US

A *New Republic* review of those Gingrich/Forstchen alternate Civil War novels explained that such alternate histories 'ooze out of the vast swamp of contemporary pseudo-literature, humid fantasy and geeky science fiction, adjacent to which is the spongy field where lurid video games are spawned, and all those graphic novels the Japanese love to read in which their country triumphs in World War II.' Now I feel all humid, geeky and spongy...

AS WE SEE OURSELVES

Michael Swanwick reports: 'Courtesy of *Locus Online*, a description of *The Road of Silk* by one of its authors. "Although the genre of the book is fantasy, this novel is a story of the battle between the dark and the light." (Barbara Dyson-Williams) I myself am thinking of writing a novel which, despite being science fiction, will be a story of space exploration.'

AS SHE SEES HER

Some think Harry Potter is fantasy, but *The Sunday Times* (24 July) knows better: 'J.K. Rowling's books seem like fantasy, but she is tackling the dark heart of the real world.' Under this headline, Rowling confesses to not realising she'd written a fantasy until after publication: 'I really had not thought that that's what I was doing. And I think maybe the reason that it didn't occur to me is that I'm not a huge fan of fantasy.' Terry Pratchett observes: 'Well, of course not: that's the stuff with all those wizards and witches and magic schools and wands and other such nonsense...'

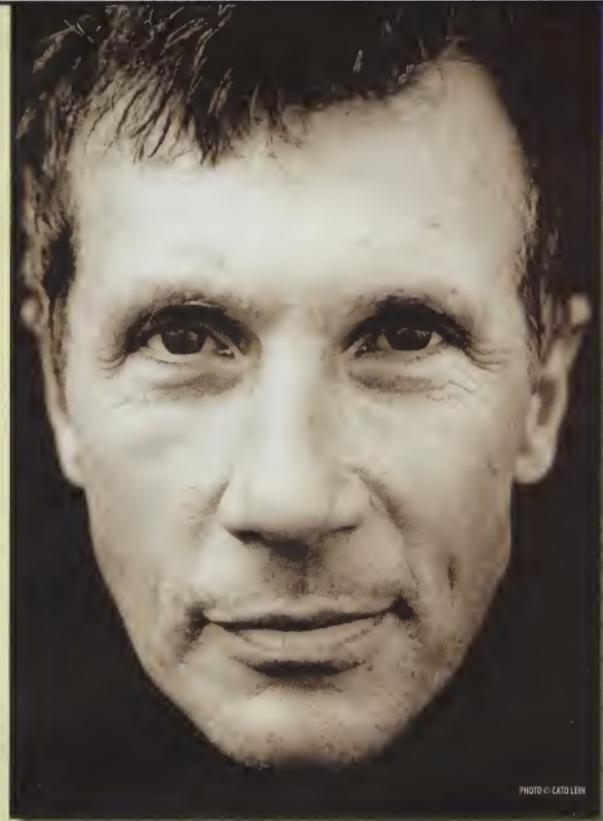


PHOTO © CATO LEIN

Michael Cunningham (above), whose *Specimen Days* includes 'a futuristic lizard woman from another planet' but no talking squid, seems sympathetic to SF. Is he interested in 'crossing over to sci-fi?', asked *USA Today*: 'No. I've always wondered if it's a good idea to separate books into the "serious literature" section, where you practically have to pay people to read them, and the "other sections," where they fly off the shelves.' But: 'I think sci-fi books are often more interesting, deep and provocative than the tepid, thinly veiled autobiographies in the serious section. Yet, almost everyone I know has read those autobiographies. I wanted to cross the line.'

AWARDS MEDLEY

John W. Campbell: Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*.
Sturgeon for short fiction: Bradley Denton, 'Sergeant Chip' (F&SF 9/04)
Rhyslings for SF poetry: SHORT Greg Beatty, 'No Ruined Lunar City'. LONG Tim Pratt, 'Soul Searching'.

Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist* caused a stir thanks to London Underground posters promoting it as 'a perfect place to have your mind blown to smithereens.' Ads printed in June and appearing on 4 July can still be retroactively damned by the Advertising Standards Authority as 'not appropriate' owing to events on 7 July.



DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Brian Aldiss became an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen's Birthday Honours: 'I was greatly chuffed by the award "for services to Literature" – a euphemism in this case for SF...'.

Robert Sheckley survived six hours of heart surgery – a triple bypass and mitral valve replacement – on 29 June.

Michael Moorcock had further health alarms owing to the circulatory trouble that led to one of his toes being amputated in 2002. He's in Paris, with infected sores on that unlucky leg, and it seemed he'd lose everything below the knee. But he made a surprise recovery: 'Astonished surgeon looks at foot and discovers only one infected spot of bone as opposed to three last week.'

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Biothermics Dept, or Why Polar Bears Do Not Exist. 'It was evidently cold-blooded or nearly so, for no warm-blooded animal could have withstood that more than glacial cold.' (George Griffith, 'Stories of Other Worlds', 190)

Dept of Motherhood and Stale Apple Pie. 'He took an instant to gulp water from a dipper, stale and welcome as a mother's love.' (S.M. Stirling & David Drake, *The Sword*, 1995)

Spare Parts Dept. 'Both slipped out of his chair. It rocked briefly in his absence, then steadied to await the next set of perambulating buttocks.' (Alan Dean Foster, *Diuturnity's Dawn*, 2002)

SELECTED HUGO AWARDS

Novel: *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, Susanna Clarke; **Novella:** 'The Concrete Jungle', Charles Stross; **Novelette:** 'The Faery Handbag', Kelly Link; **Story:** 'Travels With My Cats', Mike Resnick; **Related Book:** *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn; **Professional Editor:** Ellen Datlow; **Professional Artist:** Jim Burns; **Semi-prozine: Ansible**; **Fan Writer:** David Langford; **John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer:** Elizabeth Bear.



Steven Spielberg knows how to have fun: 'Science fiction for me is a vacation, a vacation away from all the rules of narrative logic, a vacation away from physics and physical science. It just lets you leave all the rules behind and just kind of fly.' (Reuters interview)

Gary K. Wolf's 15-week lawsuit against Walt Disney Co. over *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* earnings was decided largely in Disney's favour. Wolf, author of *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* (1981), was awarded \$180,000 in underreported royalties and nearly \$400,000 in damages, but not the \$8 million hoped from a claim that his 5% royalty should also apply to gross receipts from franchising.

R.I.P.

Carl Amery (pen name of Christian Anton Mayer, 1922–2005), German SF author, died on 24 May.

Chris Bunch (1943–2005), US author who collaborated with his brother-in-law Allan Cole on the Sten space opera series, died on 4 July. He was 62.

James Doohan (1920–2005), Canadian-born character actor inextricably identified with the part of chief engineer Montgomery 'Scotty' Scott in the original *Star Trek* and spinoff films, died on 20 June. He was 85.

Giles Hart, British SF enthusiast, died in the 7 July London bus bombing; he was 55. He chaired a branch of the H.G. Wells Society and was scheduled to speak that evening on 'The Lesser-Known Works of Lewis Carroll' (*New York Times*)

Evan Hunter (born Salvatore Lombino, 1926–2005), US author most famous for his 'Ed McBain' police procedurals, died on 6 July aged 78. He wrote three juvenile SF novels, the adult *Tomorrow's World* (1956, aka *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*), and the screenplay for Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

Warren Norwood (1945–2005), US SF author, died on 3 June. He was 59.

Bryon Preiss (1953–2005), US author, editor, publisher and book packager who founded Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc in 1974, died in a car accident on 9 July. He was 52.

David C. Sutherland III (1949–2005), US artist associated with D&D and other role-playing games, died on 7 June aged 56.

Paul Winchell (1922–2005), US ventriloquist whose genre voice roles ranged from *The Jetsons* in 1962 to *Winnie-the-Pooh's Tigger*, died on 24 June aged 83.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW > RICHARD CALDER INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL LOHR

Roger Cardinal originally coined the term 'outsider art' in 1972 to describe Jean Dubuffet's eccentric but excellent work, but it should have been coined for Richard Calder. He has made a career of providing us with a super-surfing, neuron burning, paradigm shift when it comes to ground-breaking genre fiction. Legendary genre writers like Michael Moorcock and Norman Spinrad have sung his praises on the public record and with good reason. Calder is a literary maverick. He started off normal and boring enough as an English Literature professor at the University of Sussex. But being born in the same place as the Ratcliffe Highway murders and the infamous Jack the Ripper murders - Whitechapel, London - something dark and loath like the ghost of Egyptian outcast god Setesh or Johnny Rotten crept into his psyche at an impressionable age. Something began calling to him, moving him to paint previously unexposed wordscapes of unparalleled diversity and peculiarity.

Puddle jumping around from London to Nongkhai, Thailand to the Philippines, he absorbed many influences from around the world. From his debut novel *Dead Girls*, to the sequel *Dead Boys*, to such astonishing novels as *Cythera*, *Frenzetta*, *Impakto* and *Lord Soho*, Richard always seems to grasp the sense of the alien. He finds a way to expose the remote and uncomfortable. He forces us to stare into the sun until the penumbra of predictable culture and bland behaviour is forevermore burned away.

Does the muse ever surprise you in unpleasant ways?

My muse is my doxy. (She's my heterodoxy, too, of course.) And she belongs to me and no one else. That's partly because she's the jealous type, but also (I wipe a tear from her eye as she hears me say this) because no one else will have her. We first met when I was about, what? Five years old, I suppose. At that age I didn't quite know who or what she was or where she had come from. I still remain largely ignorant of her origins. But we grew up together. And what I do know is this: she is something of an outcast; a street-girl, an errant gypsy, a marvellous minx on the run from a reform school for delinquent muses - a 'lost girl', perhaps. (I sometimes think of her as an exquisite mélange of Candy Darling and Wendy Darling.) I



took her in and she chose to stay, evolving from childhood playmate to seductress to criminal accomplice, offering creativity in return for the things that constitute 'normal life'. It's been a long engagement, a scarlet betrothal that - since her aim is to utterly possess me - can, alas, only end one way.

It follows that I have never been surprised - either pleasantly or unpleasantly - or indeed 'struck' by her. Manifest, she is no proverbial flash of lightning. Rather, she is the familiarity of the unfamiliar; the constant weirdness that walks by my side; the shadow

that I see going before me when the black sun that illuminates the worlds of the infernal imagination is directly above my head.

I have sometimes encountered her while in a state of liminal gnosis. And at such times she is as uncompromisingly physical as she is real.

It remains the case, however, that whatever poetic, psychosexual or preternatural nomenclature I might employ to describe or explain my muse, the central fact for me as a writer and a man is that she possesses a reality greater than that of anything, or

RICHARD CALDER: REBEL WITH A CLUE

anybody, I have ever known. When I was a child, she opened doors, offering me visions of people and places radically different from the grey, oppressive world around me; moreover, she shaped my central thematic concern – *amour fou* – and largely through unabashed personal example. I do what she commands, since I owe her everything.

What is your opinion on the disappearance of the midlist and is there a chance it will ever return?

The disappearance of the midlist seems to be one element in a more general trend involving the gradual undermining of diversity. Despite talk of the 'New Weird' and the 'British Boom', there's not much new, or indeed weird, out there in SF or Fantasy if we take 'new' and 'weird' to mean genuinely original, difficult, bloody-minded, or even painful and upsetting. That's not to say there're not good authors writing good books. But part of the problem is that a good book can so easily mean a safe book: one that is competently written and fits easily into a slot, finds a ready audience (rather than creating one, which all genuinely original books do) and rocks the cradle rather than the boat.

I come down, with some vested interest here, I suppose, on the side of eccentric vision. But with more and more money going to fewer and fewer authors, a reluctance by publishers to nurture talent, committee-ism rather than individualism and the belief that blandness is a safe bet – all in all, a general pusillanimity of approach – eccentric visionaries will undoubtedly find it harder to survive under the aegis of corporate publishing.

The problem, as I've suggested, is a general one. As we all know, globalization's more insidious effects are creating a standardized world, a banal unity of peoples, languages, economies, customs and ultimately, perhaps, affect. We may expect a concomitant standardization of the imagination – a consensus that we will all come to be judged by. Those

found wanting face greater dangers than not being published; they face social marginalization, with those who define the consensus displaying an increasing willingness to criminalize non-conformity in terms of disgust and terror.

One of your favourite novels is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Within the science fiction genre whose work first influenced you to write and whose writing do you still find the most fascinating now and why?

I was certainly quite influenced by the New Wave. Individual writers like Ballard and Moorcock were, and remain, important to me, but the most lasting influence was certain ideas that the New Wave 'movement' promulgated or which surrounded it. The idea, for instance, that SF could do anything, go anywhere and appropriate the stylistic and cultural concerns of writers like William Burroughs. SF, it followed, had more in common with the counterculture than the bourgeois novel; it was more 'zeitgeisty'. In other words, the New Wave encouraged a belief that SF could be a radical and experimental literature.

For quite a few years I lost interest in SF completely. I then began reading *Interzone* and became switched on to the whole cyberpunk phenomenon, particularly the work of Gibson, Jeter, and Rucker, writers who seemed to mirror so many of my own influences, from Burroughs to The Velvet Underground. Like the New Wave, cyberpunk implied that SF could be a visionary literature and absorb and freely use modernist and postmodern techniques.

What writer from outside genre writing do you find the most fascinating?
I'm a kind of serial monogamist in this regard: I fall in love with many writers, and have desperate little affairs with them (so to speak), and then – irredeemable cad that I am – pass on to someone else. Over the years there's been William Burroughs, Vladimir Nabokov, Angela Carter – all

of whom I've had babies by, so to speak (Burroughs somewhat appropriately gave birth to *Dead Boys*). At the moment I'm reading Zola, a writer whom I have conceived an immense passion for. I also seem, of late, to be fascinated by books on fashion, such as Caroline Evans' *Fashion at the Edge*, and – since I am writing a series of stories set in an erotically charged and extremely perverse alternate late nineteenth-century London – books on Victorian corsetry, such as Valerie Steele's *The Corset*, Leigh Summers' *Bound to Please*, and David Kunzle's *Fashion and Fetishism*. The 1870s–1880s – a temporal cornucopia of whalebone, tight-fitting gloves, trim ankles and artificial hair – was a period far more perverse and fetishized than our own. And it provides a suitable mirror for my own imaginative obsessions.

Your characters seem to always be longing for a sense of place, be it a metaphysical, spiritual or material much like W. Somerset Maugham's characters. Is this a reflection of your own personal longing for elsewhere? I can't think of a time when I haven't longed to be elsewhere. But all outsiders are, perhaps, engaged not merely in perpetual escape attempts, but in a search for a place they can call home. I'm an only child, and I think all only children quickly develop a sense of themselves as different. By my mid-teens, this sense of difference was compounded by the fact that the milieu I was growing up in was antithetical to my increasingly bookish concerns. I became aware that – when suburban habit is stripped away – a mean-hearted, petty, spiteful and often violent world bubbles to the surface, like pus from a lanced boil. I mentioned in another interview what a revelation Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* was. (A television drama first screened in 1977 which satirized England's lower middle-classes, and which is funny, embarrassing, but ultimately quite shocking.) As a protective mechanism, despising my surroundings became something of an addiction and – aware as

I am of the element of ridiculousness in all this – a pose. I withdrew into imaginary worlds that, later in life, I seem to have tried to superimpose on places I have run away to, such as Thailand. This sense of rootlessness persists. And I still seek, not so much the foreign – I am not in love with the alien *per se* – but a place that can accommodate me and give my sense of alienation some respite.

What is your fascination with Japanese pop culture like *kayokyoku* or anime and how has that influenced your writing? Have you ever had the opportunity to read the novels of Japanese science fiction writers like Chohei Kambayashi or Koji Suzuki?

I used to listen to quite a lot of Asian pop in Thailand and the Philippines, and I've always enjoyed anime, particularly films like *Ghost in the Shell* (I'm eager to see its sequel, *The Innocence*), and the compilations *Animatrix* and *Memories*. I know of Chohei Kambayashi and Koji Suzuki only through the films based on Yukikaze and, of course, the marvellous *Ring*.

Japan is a country that exerts tremendous cultural influence, of course, being at once alien and strangely familiar. I thought *Kill Bill I & II* a very exciting and amusing

homage: I loved the high-velocity pacing, manic action routines and the stylish use of anime sequences. Japanese popular film – say, Takashi Miike's *Ichi the Killer* and *Battle Royale* often does things Western filmmakers would not dream of, embodying a psychosexual bravado that I applaud.

Terry Pratchett and Storm Constantine are two British writers who come to mind, who have sold very well worldwide, yet have found it difficult to break into the US marketplace. Do you think your novels are a little too cutting edge for American readers in general, or is some other factor hindering your growth beyond cult status in the States? My books have always polarized the readership. There are those who enthusiastically embrace them, and there are those who regard them with an unremitting enmity. I am philosophical about this. Books that possess an idiosyncratic temperament are often faced with an uphill struggle. As suggested above, theirs is the classic dilemma of having to create an audience rather than find one. For instance, the 'Dead' trilogy has obvious antecedents, but is usually perceived as a thing apart,

and as such, difficult to assimilate. It has been the book's nature, however, to force itself upon people. 'Art is vice,' said Degas, and added: 'You don't marry it legitimately, you rape it. Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.' I like to think that, if my books are brought into being by acts of imaginative ravishment, then they themselves – perhaps merely to wreak vengeance – set out to ravish. Suffice to say, they do inflict themselves. They seek to impose their will. And whatever delight they communicate is allied to violence. It follows that, if those who enjoy them are to some extent converts, even apostles, then they are victims, too; those who howl in protest – not liking, perhaps, what they have been made to see – take my books to a place of lawful execution and stone them before, perhaps, being stoned themselves, like women taken in adultery.

Speaking of Storm Constantine, you both continue to break the narrow-minded mould of sexual myopia that still exists in most genre fiction today. Is this something that you sat out to deliberately do, or did this evolve naturally out of your storytelling abilities? In other words, was

"Dandyism in modern mass culture has evolved into camp. And I like to think of myself as a somewhat camp exponent of linguistic dandyism"

it a natural by-product of your need as a writer to break new ground? It has never been a conscious strategy. It has simply been something of a natural thematic focus. I rather grew up pondering issues of sexual identity. Such issues, along with questions of power relationships predicated by gender roles and erotic theatres of domination and submission, have always seemed to both mirror and offer themselves up as interpretations of power relationships enacted in the politico-economic sphere and on the international stage. Genet captured this brilliantly, I think, in his play *The Balcony*, in which a brothel sells illusions of power in a city convulsed by revolution until the customers assume the true-life roles of army general, judge and prelate that they had previously only fantasized about. The brothel is the world – a microcosm of the world – and the world is a brothel.

Who was your primary inspiration, either style, trend or person that influenced your writing in your formative years? What is it about Vladimir Nabokov's writing and Baudelaire's poetry that you admire? During my teens I was greatly influenced by the Symbolists and Decadents. And I enjoyed the sword-and-sorcery novels of Michael Moorcock and Fritz Leiber because of a congruence of influence in that respect: they evoked the atmosphere of perfume and poison that I discovered in Huysmans, Wilde, Verlaine and Baudelaire. Baudelaire – and of course, you mention Nabokov, too – possess a quality I perhaps admire above all things: elegance – a dandiacal elegance, that is, exquisite propriety married to impertinence, outrageousness, and an ironic detachment from the world.

I often enjoy strolling along London's Jermyn Street. (It's dedicated to bespoke suits, shirt makers, shoemakers and the like, and has a statue of Beau Brummel at its Burlington Arcade entrance.) In the days before I became an impoverished scribbler, I'd often shop there. (Church's, which make my favourite brogues, were a favourite port of call.) If I'd been a young man in the early 60s, I daresay I'd have been a Mod. These days I aspire only to be a thrift-shop dandy. A hand-me-down swell. A dispossessed masher. A charity-case Lord Muck.

Dandyism in modern mass culture has

evolved into camp. And I like to think of myself as a somewhat camp exponent of linguistic dandyism.

You once made the statement that science fiction is the province of literary outlaws and to an extent I agree, though I would digress from that opinion only in relation to those writers of the horror genre. Writers such as John Shirley, Chuck Palahniuk or China Miéville are the true black sheep of the literary world. Is this a fair assessment to make? SF should be the province of outlaws of all kinds. It is, after all, a genre readers come to in the expectation of encountering alienness and unusual, or plain bizarre, ideas. So often, however, SF merely feeds on itself, reiterating exhausted tropes, or serves to reinforce the chauvinistic and conservative notions that underlie, say, the sub-genre of Space Opera. It's true that Horror is often more challenging. Think of David Cronenberg's work, for instance. SF seldom has the visceral gusto and attack of films like *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Videodrome*, *Dead Ringers*, and *Naked Lunch*. What is interesting about Cronenberg, of course, is that he so often combines SF with Horror. And that is what I believe identifies the true black sheep: that they work within expanded parameters that ultimately defy genre. Cronenberg's films are not so much Horror or SF, rather, they're Cronenbergian. We think of them first and foremost as works of personal, idiosyncratic vision, the work, in other words, of an *auteur*.

Are you talented in any other artistic mediums, such as painting or sculpture? I heard that you were a jazz musician when you were younger. And what's this about Gesamtkunstwerk? Did you ever study Sun Ra's tripping movements? I stopped painting a long time ago. And I haven't picked up a musical instrument since my mid twenties. (And since that time I don't recall having listened much to Sun Ra, either.) The Gesamtkunstwerk? I mentioned my interest in a 'total' artwork in a previous interview, of course – an indication perhaps of longstanding megalomania. Writing, one seeks to create worlds, and I've often entertained the idea – somewhat fantastically – of creating a 'real', three-dimensional world. I'm fascinated by installations and I love

the idea of some large-scale counterpart to the universe of my imagination made out of brick, wood and steel, complete with frescoes, photographs, mannequins, sculptures, *bric-a-brac*, *objets* and music. This would be a structure you could enter and explore: corridors, secret chambers, mysterious stairwells – and all filled with the archaeological evidence of another, alien world. I would call it something like 'Elements of a Dead Nymphemberg', 'The Ravishment', or 'Epigrammatic Fragments Unearthed from the Recent Excavations on the Planet Known as Mlle Violetta X.'

Would you please tell us a little about your new novel, *Babylon*, forthcoming from PS Publishing this year?

Babylon is an alternate history. Much of the narrative takes place in the Victorian Babylon of Whitechapel, London, during Jack the Ripper's reign of terror. But the story also concerns another Babylon: a Mesopotamian Babylon that exists in a parallel dimension, a world populated and ruled by Ishtar's sacred prostitutes. It's a story about obsession and ravishment: the call of love and the call of death. And finally, perhaps, it's a story of death as religion. The novel takes up many of the themes that I've focused on in previous novels, but is, I hope, a new exercise in world-building. I hope to write other stories set in the Babylon universe. And with them, I hope to go places I've only explored the peripheries of before.

I would like to thank Richard for taking the time to answer these many probing questions. So long until next time, when we will be joining Richard on a holy quest, of sorts, into the cheap and greasy din of Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Tokyo on the hunt for Betty Boop memorabilia. Also, watch as television cameras record our attempts to smuggle one of those Japanese panties vending machines through customs. 'Why yes indeed officer, we are garment salesmen from Wyoming.'

Michael Lohr is a professional journalist whose work has appeared in such diverse magazines as *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* and *The Economist*. Links: www.michaellohrl.com; www.richardcalder.net; www.pspublishing.co.uk

Next issue: a brand new novella by Richard Calder

INTERMISSION

STORIES: STRINGS BY DAVID MACE • ILLUSTRATED BY JESSE SPEAK

The night was nothing, with clouds under the stars. It was wind silent. By the time the dropper had made a killie down line and a two hundred up, with its overwing fans and its ultrasound spoilers, it was out of hearing. It was just a piece of black shrinking into the emptiness.

DAVID MACE STRINGS





The boots squeezed the dirt. The dirt squeezed back. The sneak lay across the outer Essequibo braids, fifty killies above the tides, a hundred killies above the flooded junk that used to be Georgetown. This was a flat country like no other. It used to be wetter than any other. Land of the waters, they called it. The waters still came in plenty, some of the time, but they came irregular. Once it was North East Trades in the season. Nowadays it was storms any time, or days of searing sun that baked the bones of the ground. This place started as a basket case. Debt and corruption and climate change reduced it to a crazy paving of pieces still claiming to be a country, full of fundamentalists and fanatics and anti-Freedoms. They put their own heads on the line.

The sneak led into dry dirt, past night ghosts of grass and skeletons of scrub. Point was out in the blackness. The virtual scrub brushed past our legs. Demo was two up front of the centre. Round about there, something went *snap*. Demo stopped. The shadows stopped. Everything stopped...

Beep. Point came on. "Who is that?"

"Demo," whispered Demo. "Just a branch."

"Get your snoopers on it."

"Got my snoopers on it. Just a branch. No mines, no boobies, no wires."

The shadows stayed stopped. Everything stayed stopped.

I pushed the palm key. "Anyone hear anything?"

We listened. The suit servos sighed. Our shadows soaked up the whistle of the wind. Nothing moved but the wind.

The shadow beside me turned, silently. "No movement," said Pinoke.

We listened on our enhanced phones, servos quelled, to the absence of motion.

"Let's go," I said. "Go quiet." *Beep.*

Time, I said to myself. *Twenty-one forty-eight local, I answered.* On time, on line, in margin. We just had the road coming up at the gap between the controlled pieces, then an hour across scratch crops, then just scrub and tree ghosts until it was time to go cold while we waited through the sweltering day. On a mission like this you didn't walk through the light when the locals were out. Sure, at night the contra-guys had surveillance snoopers, but they had nothing like our tech. It's something we wouldn't allow.

Beep. Point came on. "I'm on the rise. Road's three hundred ahead. Can see clear for sixteen hundred right, thirteen hundred left. No movement. But I see tents six hundred left, our side of the road."

Time, I said. Twenty-two fifty, I answered. Still lots of time to take it careful. I reached out and tapped the shadow, then touched my fingers against the side of his head. Pinoke doesn't have phones there, but he knows I would.

"Nothing on the mission brief," Pinoke's voice said softly through naked night. "Nothing on the twelve hour update."

I opened my mask. "General brief?"

"Could be economically dispossessed. Nomadic squatters."

I thought that while we sneaked through the scrub. Pushed the

palm key. "Point, are the tents squatters or military?"

"I think squatters. It's tents and vehicles. I count four vehicles this side of the tents. Wagons. They're beat up. I see no movement, no lights. Animals other side of the tents. Donkeys or something. Look tethered."

"Sentries?"

"No sentries by snooper. Check...Ah, no sentries by IR. No one out in the scrub."

"They won't have cryptics," Pinoke whispered. His shadow strode through the scrub without twisting a twig. "But if a sentry hunkers in a bush behind a wooden shield, we wouldn't pick him up."

I thought that while we sneaked. *Map, two killie,* I told myself. It glimmered in front of my eyes. The rise was two hundred away, with Point on the top. It was a flood debris line, silted and blended into the soil. The tents would be on the other side, six hundred to the left, between the rise and the road. Except the map didn't know them. But it knew the rise, and the road features beyond it. Sixteen hundred right, the road curved into trees and the start of what counted here as civilised, which meant controlled by contra-guys. Closer on the right, the road lay straight across the exposed flat. We could get right down to the road there, wait, listen – and sneak across like writhes.

"Point, go three hundred to the right along the rise," I said. "Go careful. We'll meet you there. Friends, angle fifty degrees right." Out went the map.

We angled, two up front and three behind, and Pinoke beside me.

"The rise is flattened where we're headed," Pinoke whispered.

"Two metres."

I tapped OK on his shoulder armour. We sneaked.

"THE RISE IS FLATTENED WHERE WE'RE HEADED," PINOKE WHISPERED.

No geophones. They had geophones to keep an ear open for intruders like us. But there was nothing tacked in the ground, no cables snagged by boots, no transmission whips concealed in the green things. Pinoke picked up no induction signals. The contra-guys were never going to know we were here. Until the fire exploded...

Point was a vague possibility, two metres up on the top of the rise. In the snoopers, he was scanning left and right. Watching the road. We sneaked across a creek, through the scrub, and up on the rise. We hunkered in the vegetation.

We listened. Tail and Heavy took the wide open world at our backs. The rest took the road, from the squatters nine hundred away on the left, to the trees thirteen hundred away on the right.

Between us and the road, three hundred metres, it was going to be crawl ground between patches of cover. Same on the other side for another three to four hundred, then back on our feet and sneaking into invisibility. Piece of cake, once we got across. But in the game of life and death, don't expect cake if you want to survive.

"Armaments check," I said past the mask.

"Checked," Demo whispered.

"Check them again."

We had smart grenades that hopped like mines. Heavy and Pinoke had AV racks with smart anti-armour munitions. Half of us had a Reliever, six of us had a carbine, we all had a sidearm, plus reloads. Shotgun and Flanker had GPGs. Demo, Heavy and Pinoke carried the plastics for the forthcoming fire. We outgunned the



opposition total.

The weapons didn't need much checking. The trigger was the only moving part. The sidearm had a seven barrel pack, each barrel stacked with rounds – forty-two in total. Every round was a caseless charge, one stacked in front of the other, each electronically detonated on its way. You selected discharge pattern. Once the pack was empty, throw it away and snap on the next.

The carbine had a block of sixteen barrels, each stacked with stabilised micro-calibre. When one hit a man, he exploded. The GPG had a bigger block with a total of four hundred and eighty rounds. The Reliever you stood on its legs and selected the pattern, anything up to a continuous discharge. It had a bank of twenty by twenty. It could put four thousand rounds through the enemy in fourteen seconds.

One at a time, ten at a time or a hundred at a time, the contra-guys didn't stand a chance against us. And that was without counting our ambient armoured predator-suits, sensors, communications, infos and the intelligence briefs. It wouldn't be good for a chaos world soldier, once the sneak was over and the business began.

"OVER THE RISE," I WHISPERED. "WE DON'T ENGAGE"

Pinoké stopped moving. He froze. Not one item of kit swung loose from his suit. In his case it wasn't really a suit. It was an integral skin. "I hear intruders."

I listened. I upped the phones. A rumble on the wind, from the right, from the trees. The rumble increased while we waited the seconds.

Beep. "Vehicles coming from right. I hear –"

I pushed the palm. "Comm out."

Beep.

I hunkered, and peered between bushes. The snoopers saw nothing, but the sound contact sat right where the road emerged from the trees. Something coming, and we were out in the open, still nearer the rise than the road. *Time*, I said. *Twenty-three thirty-five*, I answered. At this time of night, anything coming along the road across wild land just had to be bad news. If it was a bunch of illegal people up to wicked things, we could sit it out in the bushes and go for the road once they'd gone. We could kill them, of course, but someone might notice. Besides, killing illegals might actually help the enemy...

Pinoké's head moved. He was still frozen in a half-crouch no soldier could maintain. "Heavy vehicles," he whispered. "Five certain, others probable. Also light tracked vehicles. It's a convoy."

Heavy's shadow unhitched its AV rack. Shotgun went on his belly and quietly slid the GPG so it pointed to the road.

We could stop a convoy. A small convoy we could destroy. But we weren't here for convoys, and we weren't here to get noticed. Not yet.

"Bug out," I said. "Fast and low. We get over the rise."

We didn't sneak. We stooped it between the bushes. We went at a bent run like goblins in invisible tunnels. No checking for snares any more. Just go for the rise and get over the crest. As my boots were crunching on the first lift of the ground...

Pinoké's sliding shape came up beside me. "Two light vehicles far side of the road. Outriders."

Shit. This convoy was trouble. It had flanking guards. Military vehicles might be using their snoopers. "Go flat."

My gloves went into the dirt. Then I wriggled like a murderous worm. I nodded up the snoopers. Pinoké's loaded suit slid past me. I followed – straight into the barrel stack of a carbine, found Tail on his side looking back through the bushes behind us.

"Over the rise," I whispered. "We don't engage."

He nodded. He slipped his carbine round, flat on the dirt.

Right on the rise, under the scrub, someone was a suit-sized rock. Flanker. He stopped me. His glove pointed through the branches. A ghost shape filled the space under the tangles. The shape had one hand raised, just above the twigs. It was a cryptic coloured periscope wearing an armoured sheath. It belonged to Pinoké. The hand turned our way for a moment, back towards the road. Then it swung to the rest of the night.

With the eye in his hand, Pinoké was watching something. I wriggled through. Branches snagged the gear on my back. I twisted over, took hold, and crushed the branches like spaghetti, no snapping sound. The suits had powerful servos. I crept in beside our Pinocchio.

"Outriders this side, too," he said. "Pair of utilities. Six occupants each. MGs and recoilless. They're coming on the other side of the creek."

Shit. We were shut in the middle. "The road?"

"Two AFVs leading, six trucks so far, more coming. The outriders across the road are also two utilities."

"OK. We'll have to sit tight." An entire convoy, plus outriders, behind us. Just two utilities in front of us. We wouldn't have time to cross out of the way ahead of them. "How close are the utilities going to pass us?"

"If they stay on the other side of the creek, about two fifty out."

Two fifty metres, in pitch darkness, with scrub scattered across the potential line of sight? And with our equipment hiding inside it?

"They'll be watching away from the road for intruders," Pinoké added. "But most of all, they should be watching the rise for an ambush on the convoy."

And we were on the rise. Even contra-guys, once in a while, get lucky...

"We get down between the rise and the creek. Pass the word. Stay flat, go quiet. Go now."

I brought my carbine up front, then dived with it under the bushes. Under the power of the predator suit, the branches parted like pliable rope. I told up my phones to search ahead and left, and quelled the servos of the guys writhing right in front of me. What I heard was... Two motors, grumbling tyres, bits of voices in Anglo-Spanish patois. *Map, one killin' with acoustic.* The location point glimmered. The rise was right at my back, the creek maybe thirty in front of me, my friends were points all around me. The contra vehicles were sound overlays creeping clockwise at ten o'clock. *Map off.*

An armoured blankness came wriggling in front of me. Trailed down its back was an AV rack. I slapped for attention. "They're



coming from the left, too far to range, other side of the creek."

Heavy's eyes looked my way, between mask and helmet and nodded-up snoopers.

I moved a dark glove through dark tangle in dark night. "Demo's five ahead of you, Shotgun's ten that way. Pull them in. Go still, go quiet, put the comm on command alert. Get the AV ready to take them out. If they find us."

Heavy thumbed OK, and left.

I wriggled around to get to our Pinocchio.

Our Pinocchio came right out of a bush in front of me. Snoopers and grills filled the face of the suit. "The convoy," whispered the voice, "is level with us. They're pulling off the road."

Pinoke used a geophone. He patched in the air-transmission phones. I stuck a jack in his waist and listened to the integrated soundscape.

One by one, trucks and AFVs trundled off the road, rocked and waltzed to select a place, and died. Feet jumped out. There was a confusion of walking. On the phones there was a slush of voices. The convoy had pulled up, so late in the night, three hundred metres from us on the other side of the rise.

The outriders came right up to the creek.

Twenty metres away, they talked over idling motors. They commed the convoy. They waited.

We waited. Seven of us and one Pinoke, with predator suits and firepower and skill. We could kill twelve men and two utilities in a couple of seconds. We could be out in the nothingness before their friends got up on the rise, and could shred them with a Reliever barrage before they had time to find us. We'd get away. But after that, we'd have to take a long walk for days until a pickup could come in for us, and the mission target would be lost. So we waited.

An AFV left the convoy and rumbled towards the rise. It paused at the top seventy metres on the other side of Heavy and Demo and Shotgun. It sat there, a midnight silhouette, throwing diesel fumes and noise. Pinoke's arm reverse-slid his AV rack off his back and poked it at the vehicle through the leaves. The moment - the infinite extended *moment*, when everything in a human life can happen - began to arrive...

They commed.

The contra-guys on the utilities started up. They rolled away until they were clear of the mud around the creek. Then they stopped and made camp. Just forty metres away. The AFV killed its motor and stayed there on the rise. It was an invitation for destruction. It should have backed off the crest and stayed hull down, with only its turret showing. They obviously weren't expecting trouble. They certainly weren't expecting us.

They sent sentries in pairs, meandering through the scrub across the creek, talking, smoking, complaining in the quiet. We could get past them. We could take out anyone who got in the way. But disappearing sentries get discovered. Again, no more mission to complete. We had predator suits so cryptic we were halfway to invisible, we had skill, we had perseverance, we had patience.

So we waited.



I crawled around and put us in a diamond - Heavy and Demo, Shotgun and Tail, Flanker and Point, Pinoke and me. We stayed under the bushes, we scooped open the dirt, we sucked ourselves into the surface graves. We shut down the servos and went cold.

Anglo-Spanish patois. "Hombres! Despierta! Up-upupup!
Comida! Breakfast! Hommm-bres! Up-upupup!"

He stamped round his convoy. He was louder than the sun.

Dawn, sunrise, morning - contra-guys came out to the rise and shat in the bushes. We stayed in our predator kit on concentrates and stasis. The leaves kept off the worst of the sun, but the air began to bake. Don't switch on the cooling. It makes the servos sigh.

"Two hundred and eight," Pinoke whispered from the dirt under the bush. "That's an estimate. Can't hear the intruders on the other side of the road."

"Any sign of them moving?"

"They're working on one vehicle. A truck."

"Repair?"

"Repair."

"THINK THEY'RE MOVING OUT?" SAID FLANKER'S VOICE.

Eight forty-four. The AFV came down off the rise, contra-crew hanging out of its hatches. It roared to the creek, splashed through the water, and headed out into the scrub. Pinoke's geophone tracked it to eight hundred out, where it stopped. Better flank security while they were sitting still in daylight. They obviously weren't expecting to move yet. Seemed to be a big repair.

Three vehicles came along the road from the opposite direction. They passed the squatters without slowing. They paused at the convoy. Then moved on.

A long wait for us super-soldiers. I got my head up and checked the bushes and the spaces in between. If this was going to take all day, we could use communication. "Can you get a fibre through the bushes without the utilities seeing it?"

Pinoke put up his hand and turned the palm around a while. "Yes."

"OK. Hook Flanker and Point."

He brought his hand down. He cocked the compression spring while the pistol was still locked at his side. He unlocked the pistol, raised it up among the leaves, adjusted its line - and fired.

I saw - just - the spool shooting out between the bushes. It didn't make a sound. I saw, more or less, the spider-fine shimmer of the fibre drifting into the grass. It had dropped through the bush where Point was lying. One little loop of it stayed caught over a branch. Pinoke offered me the jack and I listened in. There was the little sizzle of sounds as the fibre wriggled itself into the soil. Then *click*.

"Point."

"Lead. We reckon the contra-guys are going to be here for some time. Set up a loop round the square. Send a fibre to Shotgun and Tail."

"Can do."

"Activity in the squatter camp. I think they're moving out animals. The footfalls are dissipating."

Pinoke could hear everything. He could see most things, too. He could do most things, more accurately than anyone else. He

knew everything the intelligence briefings could supply. A few more design upgrades, and he'd be leading a squad of Pinokes. Someone, a natural born flesh and blood like the rest of us, didn't trust a Pinoke with command just yet. Allegedly they lacked something subtle - a little bit of killer-instinct, a seasoning of self-preservation, an absolute commitment to the pals. Until that moment when something happens that kills or will kill the pal, and self-preservation and absolute commitment to the rest of the pals takes over.

Something like that. It was the last string tied to the Pinocchio. It kept him one of the boys, one of us super-soldiers, our all-seeing, doing, thinking friend. He was worth his weight. You take the weapons, the rest of the gear, the semi-cryptic suits, the sensor enhancements, the intelligence preparation, and it made us the best in the world. But you added in a Pinoke, and we were terrifying.

"The repair work has stopped."

"Are they mounting up?"

"No."

So, hidden in our surface graves, we went on waiting.

Ten thirty-one. They sent a vehicle along the road to the squatter camp. Maybe it went to trade food, women, machine parts. Who knows? *Eleven oh-five*. It came back.

And while they didn't go anywhere, neither did we.

The drop put us down beside the Essequibo, a hundred killies short of the target. No commando units were going to come down at the river. Too far away from the target, with too many corridors linking between the mosaic pieces of the novostate, and too many no-asset people doing no-asset things in the gaps in between. No commando unit was going to drop there, march the hundred killies to the edge of the high ground, penetrate the defences ahead of an attack. The place to look for airborne intruders was way over at the target, where they had radars and air defence installations and patrolling forces. Enough radars, and enough wide-awake eyes on the ground, and even our kind of stealth machine can get itself seen. That was how they protected their inland refinery.

But we weren't commandos. And we didn't march. We sneaked.

"I CAN SEE SOMETHING," HENRY'S VOICE. "LOW."

"Motor started. Truck. I think it's the vehicle they were repairing."

"Think they're moving out?" said Flanker's voice.

"They're idling the motor."

I turned my head. I looked at the shadowed silhouette glued into the ground under the bush. Our Pinocchio, our eyes, ears and informational guide. And, along with Demo, our demolition expert. Sneak in past the defences. Creep around sticking explosives on refinery plant and aiming more explosives at command and control points. Then erase the guard barracks with Relievers and grenades while we swept through the accommodation and killed all the managers we could find. Then out into the bedlam night, slip away from the fires and chaos, and melt into the nothingness.

Sneak by night, go cold by day, vanish away. Until it was safe to call a pickup and fly off into the sky. No one was ever going to know us.

You could do it just as well from the air. But there was always

ground track evidence, some interceptor pilot who got close enough to report what was already killing him, and a lot of collateral damage. It wouldn't prove who did it, but it would let them point the finger. It would provide ammunition in the anti-Freedom war.

This way was as surgical as it could get.

We hurt like an air strike, cost a lot less collateral bodies, and it kept us clean.

We like to stay clean.

The petroleum reserves are gone. The temperature is up, the sea levels are up, chaos is engulfing the world. You have to stay strong or they'll pull you down in their own despair and destroy you.

Basket cases, fragmented nations, mayhem - and here and there a novostate skating on the brink of annihilation. And all the time, they try to take it away from us. We have sense, we have our industries and our access to reserves, we have high-grade technologies to maintain a decent life. And the firepower to protect it.

We have to protect it. Anti-Freedoms will snatch everything out of our hands.

Like the consequences of fuel proliferation.

They produced biomass and refined it with renewables. Here, they had plenty of wind as the climate went insane. Windmills, thousands of square killies of biomass - more than enough to drive their transport systems with CO₂ neutral fuel stocks. Significantly more than enough. They'd started to export it.

We can't let them export. ,

That's our business. We export fuel for the benefit of every client who'll join the crusade against chaos. When a novostate ups its biomass production and exports, it commits aggression against our economic well-being. It tries to cut back our God given advantage, it aims to wipe out our hard earned grace. It isn't true when they say we do monopolies. The anti-Freedoms love to beat us with that lie. But we do know how to preserve our legitimate interests.

We know what we have to do.

"CRAWLING THROUGH THE BUSHES..."

"There's a lot of activity at the convoy."

Pinoke was pulling in everything the rest of us heard and sent down the fibre. "They're getting ready to go."

"Mounting up?"

"Not yet. But they're going to."

"The utilities?"

"They're striking camp."

I could hear that myself. Voices, shouts, something banged around, things stacked on a utility load bed. Any time soon they were going to mount up and drive. The convoy would head off along the road. All we needed was for the utilities, and the AFV out in the scrub, to turn and run parallel to the road. Don't close up with them yet. If they had any tactical sense, they'd stay outside the squatter camp and only close up when the road hit the regulated ground at the border of the next chunk of the novostate. And us? We'd stay right where we were for the rest of the day, then cross the road after dark.

"I can hear something else. It's this side of the creek, direction of the squatter camp."

The heart, you'd swear, missed its metronome beat. Just the one. This might be the coming of the *moment*, the infinite *now...* "What is it?"

"Not distinguished. Very light footfalls. I can't tell how many."

"Going anywhere?" And I took time to say *time*, and it told me *thirteen oh-three*.

Pinoke said nothing. Pinoke just listened. Someone was shouting orders by the utilities. Motors were starting up on the road. Back there, a lot of voices were yelling at each other. A few

Then he put up a hand into the leaves and started turning it around. "I don't see anything. But it's coming this way."

Map, one killie.

It glimmered against the steel-bright sky beyond the leaves.

Creek here, rise there, me and Pinoke in the location point,

Friends right around us. Two bandit utilities across the creek, one
ATV eight hundred further out. The partially determined convoy,
still unseen after all this time, beyond the rise where the road ran

through the map. With acoustic. The utilities sparkled with noise sources. The convoy blanketed itself in sounds.

And Pinoke's contact lay like a dispersed fan, with no range and no discrimination, right in the gap between creek and rise.

"It's – shit, it's checking out the bush."

Carbine on rapid continuous. *It?* What does he mean, *it...?*

"It's a goat."

It's a *what*?

"Mother of fucking God, it's just a goat."

Oh God. Take a breath. The breath stretched the plates of my armour. "OK. It's a goat. Go quiet. Don't spook the goat."

"I see more goats." Pinoke's hand was switching around. "More coming. Those are the footfalls. *I also hear human feet. Child*"

"More goats," said Demo's voice. "They're coming past us. Both sides."

A herd of goats wandering right through the middle of us, a goatherd. Couldn't take a different route? Couldn't wait until the convoy had moved out? No. Us, stuck in the middle of the mess – that's where the goats chose to go. "From the squat," whispered.

"Assume," Pinoke whispered back. Silently, he began to up on his shoulder. The AV rack came out of the grave release. His carbine wriggled around between the beams. He wasn't aiming at the goats. It was directed towards

A motor revved, forty metres away. Goats skittered them. I finally saw one. It skipped a few strides before bushes. It stood and stared. It trotted away between the bush full of Shotgun and Tail.

"I can hear something else. It's this side of the creek, direction of the squatter camp."

The heart, you'd swear, missed its metronome beat. Just the one. This might be the coming of the *moment*, the infinite *now... what is it?*

"Not distinguished. Very light footfalls. I can't tell how many."

"Going anywhere?" And I took time to say *time*, and it told me thirteen oh-three.

Pinoke said nothing. Pinoke just listened. Someone was shouting orders by the utilities. Motors were starting up on the road. Back there, a lot of voices were yelling at each other. A few more minutes, and the contra-guys were going to move.

But Pinoke just listened to the ground.

Then he put up a hand into the leaves and started turning it around. "I don't see anything. But it's coming this way."

Map, one killie.

It glimmered against the steel-bright sky beyond the leaves. Creek here, rise there, me and Pinoke in the location point, friends right around us. Two bandit utilities across the creek, one AFV eight hundred further out. The partially determined convoy, still unseen after all this time, beyond the rise where the road ran through the map. *With acoustic*. The utilities sparkled with noise sources. The convoy blanketed itself in sounds.

And Pinoke's contact lay like a dispersed fan, with no range and no discrimination, right in the gap between creek and rise.

I unlocked my carbine. "Stand by to go live. Intruders coming in on Heavy and Demo's sector." Carefully, silently, I turned the carbine around under the branches without disturbing a leaf. "Sounds like a lot of guys moving quietly. Don't react until they're among us. No response until they contact."

Which, in this case, meant touch one of us with a hand or a foot – either find us, or simply tread on us. And then we opened up with small arms. Kill as many as possible in as few seconds as possible. Shock them with death springing out of the ground.

Then kill the survivors, the utilities, the AFV. Relievers on the rise to shred the convoy. And then run.

In daylight, we weren't going to get away with this.

The contact fan opened wider. The intruders came nearer. Pinoke's free hand unhooked his carbine. His watching hand retreated deeper in among the leaves. My phones heard clicks – the AV rack activating under his back. We'd make a single sweep with firearms, and then Pinoke would be hitting the utilities.

"They're getting excited at the utilities," said Flanker's voice.

The moment was coming closer...

"They're calling to someone," Pinoke said quietly.

I listened. I heard motors, meaningless chatter, and a voice I couldn't decipher. If intruders were sneaking up on us, why were the utility guys calling?

"I can see something." Heavy's voice. "Low. Crawling through the bushes..."

Servo on. And ready for radio comm, as soon as we stand up and jack out from the fibre line.

"It's – shit, it's checking out the bush."

Carbine on rapid continuous. *It?* What does he mean, *it...?*

"It's a goat."

It's a *what?*

"Mother of fucking God, it's just a goat."

Oh God. Take a breath. The breath stretched the plates of my armour. "OK. It's a goat. Go quiet. Don't spook the goat."

"I see more goats." Pinoke's hand was switching around. "More coming. Those are the footfalls. I also hear human feet. Child."

"More goats," said Demo's voice. "They're coming past us. Both sides."

I thought that, while the sun crept past the summit of the sky, just leaves and dust and infinite air above my eyes. Goats. A herd of goats wandering right through the middle of us, plus a goatherd. Couldn't take a different route? Couldn't wait until the convoy had moved out? No. Us, stuck in the middle of the mess – that's where the goats chose to go. "From the squatters?" I whispered.

"Assume," Pinoke whispered back. Silently, he began to roll up on his shoulder. The AV rack came out of the grave, ready to release. His carbine wriggled around between the branches. It wasn't aiming at the goats. It was directed towards the utilities.

A motor revved, forty metres away. Goats skittered. I heard them. I finally saw one. It skipped a few strides between the bushes. It stood and stared. It trotted away between us and the bush full of Shotgun and Tail.

"One utility moving," Pinoke said. "Heading away. One vehicle moving on the road. Heading towards the squatters."

I thought that. Moving out at last. We get rid of the convoy.

"THEY'RE CALLING TO SOMEONE," PINOKE SAID QUIETLY.

It starts towards the squatter camp. Some of the squatter camp comes to us. This first night's sneak had turned out shit from start to finish.

"There's a kid," said Demo's voice. "He's going past us. He keeps looking... Keeps looking at the utilities."

"More vehicles moving on the road. One utility still here."

I could hear the utility, motor idling and voices talking. "The AFV?"

"Hasn't moved." And Pinoke had retrieved his watching hand. Now it was deploying the AV rack, parallel to his carbine. Pinoke was ready. If anything went wrong while the utility was still there, the utility was the first target. Kill it. Then the other utility. Then the AFV.

If anything went wrong. Like a goat eating our bush away. Or the goatherd...

"Trouble," said Point's voice, very quietly. "Goat coming into the bush here."

A goat, a stupid goat, eating its way into the vegetation, where a couple of semi-cryptic super-soldiers were lying in the shade in their predator suits. If it noticed them, if they spooked it... "Don't move. Wait it out."

Then the branches over my feet shook. I saw the back end of a goat skip away.

Pinoke's AV stayed pointing through the bushes, exactly towards the utility.

"The kid's going towards Point's goat," Demo said. "Shouting. Wants it to move."



I could hear the tiny child voice. I could still hear the noises from the remaining utility. They didn't seem to be paying any attention to the goatherd. But they were still here. Still right on top of us.

"The goat's stuck." That was Flanker's voice. "Kid's coming over."

"Tangled in something," Point said. "Maybe...I can reach..."

And the moment was coming. It was expanding out of its singularity. Bringing its absolute reality on adrenalin wings. Overwhelming the now...

The goat was at Flanker and Point's bush. It was tangled in something. It was the loop of fibre that fell across a branch when Pinoke shot it over. The rest of the fibre had buried itself in the ground. One little loop didn't. It was the only string. It was attached to Pinoke, and attached to Point, and attached in stages to every one of us. The goat got itself caught in our string.

Almost all of the convoy still here. Forty metres away, one of the utilities still here. Eight hundred out, the AFV is still there. And the goat gets itself tangled. And the goatherd goes to help. And he's in sight and sound of the utility.

"YOU'RE THE BEST SHOT," I SAID.

The now is growing its wings...

I rolled up on my elbows. Branches snapped. Didn't matter. A goat shied away but the goatherd wasn't looking. He was at the bush with the tangled goat. He was leaning over it. Didn't have to lean very far. Must have been eight, no more. Skinny, gaunt, underfed. No shoes, baggy shorts, T-shirt holes. He was tweaking at something round the animal's neck. Our smart fibre made shivering sounds.

I poked the carbine out. The carbine made noise. The utility would be right on us. Pinoke would kill the utility. The AFV would see it. Pinoke, or Heavy, would kill the AFV. By which time the convoy would know. Fire fight, explosions, columns of smoke. They'd come for us. In broad daylight. The moment would go on and on...

The boy pulled up the animal's head. The animal came free. It jumped away. Right at the edge of the bush, the boy stood up and studied his little hands.

I couldn't see the fibre in his hands.

If the kid yells...Gun won't do. We've all worked that out. If we shoot him to stop him we'll have to shoot the contra-guys, we'll have to shoot the convoy, the convoy will be too big for us to take down, they'll shoot us. They'll get us. But if the kid yells they'll hear the yell, and we'll have to shoot...

The boy tugged the cobweb fibre. It squeaked at us.

Behind the little boy, who was staring at the wispy apparition in his hands, a shape started to rise inside the bush. Still semi-cryptic even under the sun, all leaf patterned and light dappled, the predator suit began to reach for him.

The boy tugged at the fibre. It squealed. The tug took him a step away from the bush. He took a second step.

"If I get him before he's in the open," said Point's voice, "keep – " A tug. The fibre shriek. No more talk.

The boy hauled his hair-thin find out of the ground, and walked towards us. The predator behind him froze into invisibility.

The utility was still there!

Rush at the kid? They'd see. Carbine out of the question.

Sidearm out of the question. Can't grab him to silence him. Can't kill him to silence him.

The spring-loaded pistol! It makes no sound!

"The pistol," I whispered.

Pinoke, a screen of stems away, put down his carbine. The rack stayed trained on the utility. His free hand cocked the pistol locked to his suit. He slipped a spool into the barrel. The fibre spindle would strike a naked target like a crossbow bolt.



The little boy stopped. He looked carefully at his fibre. He looked our way. He looked back. He didn't notice wherever Point was still stooping. He looked our way again. He pulled in some of the loose fibre.

The pistol landed across my forearm. Pinoke's oh-so-human glove retreated.

"You're the best shot," I said.

Pinoke didn't even look. "That's an eight year old child."

"You're the best shot," I let go of my carbine and took the pistol. "Neck." I offered it back. "So he can't scream."

"I can't kill a child."

"What?"

"That's a decision I can't take."

"What?"

And the kid looked up. He'd heard the hiss. He tweaked the fibre.

Then he looked both ways. Quickly. The fibre again. He began to realise. His mouth started to open –

"Life decision," said Pinoke. "Not mine."

And I looked at...

The silent pistol. The skinny boy. Us. The utility. The rest of the contra-guys. The goats. The squatters. Their lives. Our lives. The boy's life.

The final fragment of now reached its irreducible forever.

The first breath of the boy's shout began to sound...

David's first short story was published long ago, "But fortunately the world has completely forgotten. Then I went to live for several years in what the Brits call 'Europe' – as if, nonsensically, the Brits themselves weren't a part of it. The experience cleaned out all the unthinking English self-satisfaction with which I'd grown up and turned me into, well, a European. Euros – love 'em. Social democracy – that's what I believe in. A country called Europe – I'd want to be there. Oh, well."

Meanwhile, David's first novel *Demon 4* was published in 1984, followed by a second pure SF novel, two cross-overs and then three mainstream thrillers. Of which, *Frankenstein's Children* received the best review, by Faren Miller, I ever happened to read for any book, while *Shadow Hunters* and *Chasing The Sun* became big sale successes. At which point the sharp and awful recession of the early 90s hit British publishing, Hodder & Stoughton imploded, and that was that.

Ambitions? "To start with, I'll be happy if I can re-establish a profile among the ranks of far better exponents of SF. Beyond that, what I'd really want is the chance to publish stories that blend SF elements with styles and concerns from other sources, such as police procedurals or mythic apprehensions or the simple experience of living life in the idiosyncratic setting. Mmm, dreams. Life is made of dreams..."

This is David's first story for Interzone, and we hope it's the first of many.

INTERMISSION

STORIES • SOFT APOCALYPSE BY WILL McINTOSH • ILLUSTRATED BY CHRIS NURSE

Soft Apocalypse



I passed a lithe cormorant of a woman trying on gas

masks at a street kiosk. She was gazing intently into a little round mirror mounted on a telephone pole, wearing a cute round avocado-colored mask. I loved the way she moved, loved her librarian glasses and her buzz-cut. Was she too good looking for me? I wasn't sure.

The lanky beauty left my field of vision. I continued scanning, assessing each woman I passed as a potential girlfriend, labeling them as 'yes' or 'no' in a heartbeat. I couldn't help it. All of the other features of the world receded – all the beautiful crumbling architecture, the colorful street vendors, the black diesel stink in the air – all of it shrank into the background as I obsessively evaluated each woman I passed, testing my heart for fluttering, getting a sense of her from her walk, her expression, the bob of her breasts.

Not that I'd ever approach a woman on the street; I hated guys who did that. For me it served as some sort of rehearsal – practice for identifying my soulmate when she arrived. Or maybe it was a way to reassure myself that there were women in this city who could reignite that flame, if I could meet them.

And like a line of song stuck in my head, I thought of Deirdre, who had last ignited that flame, and felt a familiar stab of guilt. Small, childlike, fish-faced Deirdre.

What had she done with my photos?

There had been no cut-up pile greeting me in the doorway the day I broke up with her. No charred corners mixed with the ashes in the fireplace (showing a tantalizing hint of a sneaker; the ornament-laden branches of a Christmas tree...). They'd just been gone when I got home, all the digital backups deleted from my computer. Did she toss them in a dumpster? Did she still have them?

I missed them to my bones. I had no proof now, that I had a past, that I'd once been a child. I never would have guessed it would hurt so much to lose them. Evidently Deirdre had.

I slowed as I passed Jittery Joe's Coffee, hoping against hope to score a cup. The NO COFFEE TODAY sign still hung on the board outside, as it had for the past three weeks. And there was a new, smaller sign below it: NO MILK. I continued on, caffeine-free, toward my speed-date appointment.

I spied a sexy pair of legs in the crowd, strutting my way. I got a jolt when her face came into view. She'd been infected with that flesh-eating virus someone unleashed in Philly a few years back. One whole side of her face was caved in; the damage trailed down her neck, disappearing inside a silk blouse. I did my best to hold my smile when she glanced my way, but it felt stiff. Poor woman.

A busty black woman with dreadlocks and tribal scarring hurried past. I glanced back. Her ass was like a beachball, too big, but in an erotic sort of way.

There was a bamboo outbreak on 39th Street. I stopped to watch. Street doctors were tearing up the pavement with jackhammers, circling the affected area, racing to set up rhizome barriers before the bamboo could spread. Four police officers with heat-rifles surrounded the perimeter, along with half a dozen of those little mechanical bodyguard rat-things, as if jumpy-jumps and terrorists were going to try to interrupt their little street cleaning operation. Real terrorists didn't give a shit about bamboo.

The asphalt cracked and popped. Some people couldn't stand

the crumbling, crunching sound of bamboo growing through pavement, but I didn't mind it. Part of me rooted for the bamboo, the kudzu, the driftmoss, all the plant-viruses unleashed by angry adolescent bioteches looking for attention. I thought they were an improvement over concrete and asphalt. And they were harmless, childish mischief, when you put it in perspective. They didn't explode, or cause your organs to melt, or paralyze you. Or cause all the cats to die. Or require you to carry a gas mask.

I tapped my waist-pouch to make sure my fold-up gas mask was there, just like the government public service cartoon taught us.

"ID?" An acne-scarred man in combat fatigues barked at me as I turned the corner in front of the civil defense store. I didn't know who was who anymore. He could have been police, army, mafia.

There was a body lying nearby, half in the street, half on the sidewalk, one foot twisted at an odd angle. Vehicles were swerving to avoid it.

I stood still while the guy scanned my eyes with his little silver wand. It bleeped. He glanced at the readout on the screen clipped to his thick utility belt.

"OK," he said, waving me on.

When I reached the SpeedMatch outlet on 34th Street, I dawdled outside, pretending to tie my shoe on a bench. I ducked through the revolving door when no one was looking. I felt like such a loser going in there – much like I used to feel when I was eighteen, skulking into porn shops. It'd been three years since I'd last resorted to a dating service. I couldn't believe I was back.

It's humbling to be starting over from scratch at 38. How many more women would I have to tell all of my stories to – all of my funniest anecdotes, what music I like, how I got the scar on my throat? Three more? Eleven?

"I'm here for the ten o'clock," I said to the receptionist, who sported the thick makeup of a woman too young to realize that sometimes less is more.

She led me to my room, showed me how to download my vitals and bio-video from the boost I'd brought, helped me put on the VR equipment, then shut the door behind her. My palms were sweating.

The VR landscape was hackneyed but impressive: I was sitting in a burgundy reading chair on a slate patio, in the center of a beautiful formal garden. To my left, water pattered from a winged water nymph reaching toward the sky from the center of a fountain. A bed of perfect yellow tulips bobbed in a slight breeze on the other side. The garden was in a valley, surrounded by towering white mountain peaks; a waterfall burst from a cave in one mountain, crashing into a lake in perfect white-noise harmony with the fountain.

"Five minutes till your first date," a mellifluous female voice informed me from out of the sky. I wondered if women heard a man's voice.

"Mirror, please," I said, and checked to make sure I didn't have a piece of dandruff dangling from one of my eyebrows. Everything was shiny and perfect inside the VR environment except us daters – exact replication of what you had was all you got.

"Thank you." The mirror disappeared. Mirrors aren't good things to have around on blind dates; the process makes you self-conscious enough.



In the air to my left, my first date's vitals appeared, along with the lie-detector readout, currently flatlined. Her name was Maura (though that didn't mean much; lots of women didn't give their real names to minimize the lunatic stalker factor), she was 35, a physician, lived in Trenton. Liked Fuzz-Jazz and Postal music, and freerunning. I took a few deep breaths, readying myself for thirty-eight three-minute dates.

Maura materialized in the chair across the table. She had bushy brows and a pointy chin. Long thin nostrils that you couldn't help but see into when you looked at her. Kind of aristocratic looking. Interesting.

"Hi Jasper. I have a few questions that I like to ask, then if you want you can ask me questions." She talked fast, but with three minutes that was par.

"Sounds fine," I said. Suddenly my nose itched; I resisted scratching it. Scratching, or any sort of face-touching for that matter, doesn't convey the best first impression.

"How many times have you cheated on a wife or girlfriend?"

I gawked at her. She had to be joking. What kind of an opening question was that?

"Less than twelve," I finally said.

She looked at me the way my grade school teachers used to when I was being bad and I knew it.

"Is your salary statement accurate?"

"Sometimes." It wasn't like my salary was all that impressive. If I was going to lie, I would have done better than what was listed.

"Do you have any bizarre sexual interests?"

"Define bizarre."

I knew her type. She'd had some bad dating experiences and now she focused more on what she *didn't* want than what she did want. Avoidance dating. She was already angry with me for the thoughtless things I would potentially do if we dated.

When she finished I asked her a few questions: Have you ever stolen a shopping cart from a grocery store? What's your favorite Drowned Mermaids song? You don't know the Drowned Mermaids? Hm. That could be a problem. I pretended to jot a note; she didn't seem to realize I was being sarcastic. Maura faded away. I scratched my nose with a vengeance.

Next was Victoria. She was too fat: big and boxy – a rectangle over disproportionately skinny legs. As we talked I chided myself for being shallow, then I snapped back at the chiding voice: attractiveness matters; it's not the only thing that matters, but it matters, and I'm not going to pretend it doesn't matter to satisfy my less-than-attractive female friends, who don't want it to matter. A girlfriend has to be reasonably attractive, or at least reasonably attractive to me. I find gangly women with overbites terribly attractive. Also nerdy women – shy, socially awkward librarian types really do it for me.

When Victoria faded I downloaded her bio-video out of courtesy. I probably wouldn't watch it, but she seemed nice and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. A few seconds later she downloaded mine as well.

Gizelle was Latina, cute as hell. She looked me up and down. Her lip curled. It was a very tiny curl, and it dropped right back into place, but over the years I'd developed a keen radar for rejection.

"Hello," she said rather stiffly.

"Hi," I said, "Look. I can see from your expression that I'm not your type." She didn't argue. "Instead of forcing you to pretend to be interested, why don't we just take it easy for a few minutes?"

She shrugged. "OK." She called for a mirror and pulled a lipstick out of her bag.

I used the time to picture Deirdre stuffing every photo I owned down the sewer, a handful at a time.

There was me, getting on the bus for my first day of kindergarten. My sister Jilly, fitting her hand in Shirley Temple's handprint in Hollywood. Grandpa, proudly holding up a fish he'd caught. Me, sitting on the stoop outside our house in Trenton, the exact spot where I ate the sabotaged M&M when I was ten.

They never figured out how the jumpy-jumps got the bad M&Ms into the bags, but I guess for people who can design M&Ms that expand rapidly when the chocolate center comes in contact with saliva (but not so rapidly that the expansion takes place in the victim's mouth), re-sealing bags wouldn't be a big deal. The M&M sabotage personified the sort of sadistic, brilliant showmanship and true randomness that has become the jumpy-jump trademark, and distinguishes them from your run-of-the-mill terrorist.

Jilly was there that day. I don't remember what we were doing, but I remember it was a green M&M. When I crunched it, it had a chalky texture, but it was still sweet and chocolaty, so I swallowed it.

It didn't go down – I could feel it wedge in my throat, like a pill when you don't swallow it quite right. I swallowed hard, but it still didn't go down, and now it felt like a bug was in my throat, moving around, pressing against the walls. Jilly asked if I was all right, and I slapped my back.

I couldn't catch my breath – it was hard to inhale, and I was making this awful whistling sound. Jilly screamed for mom. Mom took one look at me and started screaming for help.

I don't remember the name of the nurse across the street who saved my life. She had frizzy blonde hair. She laid me on my back and stuck her finger down my throat, and said "Jesus Christ, what's in there? What did he eat?" Around that time my throat closed completely, and I lay on the stoop with tears rolling down my cheeks, staring up at their faces, suffocating.

And then something shifted. I knew I was going to die. I was certain. So I gave up, I stopped trying to breathe. I stared, open-mouthed, at my mom, then at Jilly, who was screaming my name. I wanted to tell her it was OK, that I wasn't scared any more.

"Get me a knife!" The nurse screamed from far away, and my mom went running, and I felt...fine. I would die, yes, but everything was all right nonetheless.

And as I watched the knife come down over my throat, felt the pinch, the warm blood rolling down my neck, still I couldn't find my fear. The nurse told me to breathe, but I didn't see any need, until she pushed hard on my chest and I had no choice, and a red spray shot out of the hole she'd cut, and I was breathing through my neck.

When I got home from the hospital I sat on the front porch and looked at the world. They thought I was in shock, but I wasn't. I was in ecstasy. It was as if every molecule in the world had been washed and made new, including the ones inside me. I watched a Styrofoam takeout box blow across the lawn, surprised and delighted by every bounce and twist it took. I inhaled the summer wind, my lungs crackling with an electrical charge. Everything was fine, I realized. Everything.

The feeling stayed with me. When I walked to the bus stop I bobbed like a cork on water. And even years later I could go and find the feeling inside me – I could scoop out a handful and

warm myself over it when I needed to. It wasn't until I was almost an adult that I realized it was gone, that I'd drunk dry the last of the M&M feeling. Every so often I searched for it, but although I could remember what it had felt like, I couldn't recapture it. All I had was a photo of the stoop where it had happened. Until Deirdre took the photo, and I didn't even have that.

The next woman materialized, interrupting my reverie. She was in a wheelchair.

The first time I'd done this speed-dating thing, I'd figured the difficult part would be trying to seem clever and kind and confident, all in the space of three minutes. But the truly difficult part was masking disappointment and disinterest.

For the third time today, I struggled to keep a stiff smile pasted on my face as we danced through the nice-to-meet-yous.

From the rubbery, slight movement of greeting she made with her hand, Maya was a victim of Polio-X, that Top 40 dial-a-virus that swept the nation in '22. She had some nerve, I thought, getting on a dating service, inflicting us with guilt for rejecting her because she had a disability. Then I got hold of my irrational lizard brain and realized how incredibly unfair that was. She wasn't twisting anyone's arm. But there was no way I could be with her. A wheelchair was just too much baggage. I was not the sacrificing type, willing to wipe a woman's butt if that's what she needed. It just wasn't me. Maybe I'm not giving and self-sacrificing enough to ever have a truly successful relationship. At least I'm honest about it.

"So you're an economist?" I said, seeking a polite topic that would pass the time, while hopefully conveying that I thought she was interesting, but that I wasn't interested. "Any insights to offer on the current state of affairs? When do you think the market's going to turn around?"

"Wow, that's kind of a personal question, don't you think?" Her voice dripped sarcasm – she saw what I was doing, and was calling me on it.

I laughed uncomfortably.

"It's not going to turn around," she said. "It's going to get worse, and then it's going to collapse completely."

I laughed uncomfortably again.

"You think I'm kidding," she said.

"It's got to turn around eventually."

"No it doesn't," she said. "It didn't for the dinosaurs."

"OK," I said. Next she'd probably tell me about the end of days,

and ask if I'd made my peace with Jesus Christ.

"I can see you don't believe me," she said, gesturing toward the lie-detector, not unkindly.

"It's not a question of believing. I can see you believe what you're saying, and I'm sure you're good at what you do, but how sure can you be about something like this? Honestly?"

"Every Nobel Prize winning economist who's still alive is sure of it," she said. "The economy is slowly collapsing. Remember all those dire warnings about global warming, overpopulation, resource depletion, the rain forest, save the whales? Any of that ring a bell?"

"Uh huh," I said mildly. I'd evidently picked the wrong topic. How much time did I have left with her? One minute, forty-six seconds.

"They weren't kidding. Billions of people are going to die before it's over." She gestured at my lie-detector readout with her chin. I looked at it. 97% honesty. Not even a hint of exaggeration.

She had an interesting face. Big, wide mouth showing lots of teeth – what I'd always thought of as a shark-mouth – and scary light blue eyes, like see-through gossamer fabric draped over sky. If it wasn't for the wheelchair. Well, if it wasn't for the wheelchair she'd be out of my league. I suppose if I was OK with the wheelchair, it would be one of those reasonable trade-offs that we all pretend don't really enter into love and relationships: she settles for a somewhat immature, big-nosed, ruddy-faced guy, and I got a woman who was more attractive than I could reasonably have hoped for, but in a wheelchair, with arms and legs that were mostly useless.

"Why aren't they warning people?" I asked, not really wanting to hear the answer, but needing to say something because I'd been silent for three or four seconds.

She laughed. "They've been shouting it from the rooftops for years! There was an article in the New York Times just a few weeks ago. Nobody listens to academics. Smart is passé."

It was a reasonable argument. And for the past ten years things had only gotten worse. Blackouts, war, fifty-seven varieties of terrorists, water shortages, plagues.

It reminded me of a story about frogs, that if you put them in an open pot of water and turned on the burner, they just sit there and boil to death, because they're not equipped to recognize and respond to gradual changes in water temperature. They could jump out at any time, but there never comes a time when their little brains judge it's time to jump. So they cook.

I looked into her earnest, translucent eyes, and tried on her



hopeless, empty version of the future, filled with plagues and hunger, flies buzzing over corpses, thick-necked men with guns.

Could things really just keep getting worse? Could the economy really collapse? Now I wasn't sure.

"This could be terrible," was all I could think to say.

She checked the readout, softly nodded agreement. "I'm sorry I dumped this in your lap. It's not why we're here. But you asked." She took a deep breath, and smiled at me, showing all those teeth. "Actually, I think what you asked for was financial advice," she said. "Put all of your money in ammo."

I laughed, and for a moment I thought *maybe*. There was something about her that gave me a warm, almost nostalgic feeling.

We sat in silence, listening to the patter of the fountain.

"So," she said, clearing her throat. "Know any jokes?"

I laughed. "Yeah. There was this guy who could be kind of a jerk..."

Maya faded away, which was fortunate, because I didn't know how the joke ended.

A new profile came up. It was hard for me to concentrate on it. Danielle, 31, Energy Consultant (whatever the hell that meant), a daughter, twelve years old. Widow. I wanted time to think.

Danielle materialized across the table. "Jasper, so nice to meet you!" she said, wobbling her head enthusiastically. She was very bubbly, attractive in an Italian sort of way. Really nice lips.

I tried unsuccessfully to keep up with her enthusiasm, and she didn't seem to notice that I was speaking from inside a black funk. She asked about my job, I asked about hers. She dropped some flirtatious lines that I fumbled – I sucked at flirting even on my best days. I wondered how her husband had died.

When I was young I'd taken for granted that, while there might be intermittent wars, disasters, economic downturns, overall things would remain about the same. But people had always inflicted suffering on other people, pretty much unceasingly, since the beginning of history. So as better ways to inflict suffering were developed, of course more suffering would be inflicted. Once biotechnology advanced to the point where a bright amateur could devise and release plagues on a shoestring budget, of course some would.

And all of a sudden it seemed obvious. I was living through an apocalypse. I was at a dating service in the middle of a slow apocalypse. Things weren't going to get better like the government said, they were going to keep getting worse.

Danielle told me that she'd really enjoyed meeting me; I said me too, although I had no idea whether I'd enjoyed meeting her or not. There was a song spinning in my head now, some really old thing about how when the world was running down, make the best of what's still around. It's funny how apropos songs find their way into your head without you realizing.

As Danielle faded, I looked at the water nymph stretching toward the sky, the plume of water pouring from her mouth. Her wings were too small for her body, giving the impression that if she were to fly, it would be a strenuous ordeal – not the soaring freedom of a gliding eagle, but the mad flapping of a fruit bat.

The next few speed-dates went by in a fog. There was Savita, a tiny Indian woman with big doe-eyes and long black hair that she draped over one shoulder the way Indian women do. Keira, who had raccoon shadows under her eyes. I struggled to hear them over the winding-down of the world and the sound of tearing photos.

Then came Emily, who made bad jokes and oozed desperation.

Most people can't stand being single. I see friends get divorced, then immediately implement the 'best available' strategy, desperately seeking the most viable single person they can find in the course of, say, three months, and marrying that person. They can't stand the idea of not being with someone. It's like the light is too bright. They race to the nearest shade.

When you're unattached, you live life closer to the edge. A partner gives you a sense of security, and I think it can lead to complacency, to life-laziness, if you're not careful. You don't feel the need to live vividly. Being single means there's no safety net. It's riskier. If you lose a leg stepping on a street-mine, you won't have a wife to wheel you around. If you drink milk laced with clotting factor and have a stroke, you won't have a wife to wipe the drool off your chin.

The next woman's name was Bodil Gustavson, 33, artist. She materialized. My heart started to pound slow and hard.

It was Deirdre. Jesus Christ, it was Deirdre.

"Oh, this is going to be good," she said. She was sucking on a green lollipop. It brought back images that I quickly shoved aside.

I'd met Deirdre at an art opening at NYU, an MFA exit show that my professor friend Cuddy invited me to. Deirdre was an artist of sorts, but she wasn't a faculty member or a student – more of an art department groupie. She was wearing six or seven neck rings that accentuated her ostrich-neck, and a black skintight leotard that accentuated her enormous breasts.

Was that what really attracted me to her? Could all the malarkey about that ineffable 'spark' between people be reduced to one shallow, primordial characteristic, and we just don't want to admit it to ourselves? If Deirdre had been as flat as my uncle Ted, would that electric butterfly have still fluttered through all of my major organs when I saw her?

She had a mind like jet-fuel, bulging eyes, cute little hands that were always fidgeting. I could tell she was damaged goods, but who wasn't, after everything that's happened? She had a childlike quality that melted me like a creamsicle on a July sidewalk.

I'd started to worry when she showed me her collection of 911 recordings. She had thousands of them, catalogued by type of emergency. She played me some of her favorites – people screaming into the phone, people dying into the phone. She had recordings of six-year-old kids telling the 911 operator that mommy's face had turned blue and foam was coming out of her mouth, and women with numb voices saying they'd just been gang-raped by intruders. She said it was a new kind of art. Seemed to me it was a very old kind.

"So tell me – Jasper, is it? – what are you looking for in a woman?" she said, pointing the lollipop at me.

"What did you do with my photos?"

I'd called the police, but they'd said petty theft was no longer a prosecutable crime. They had to prioritize their resources. When the world was running down, you had to cut corners.

"Fuck you, Jasper. You over me already? I thought you said you were going to need at least six months before you'd even think about dating again?"

"It was easier than I expected to move on, after you stole from me and all."

The day I broke up with her, I'd been shocked by the hatred Deirdre could express with her eyes. She gave me the same razor-gleare now.

"So tell me, do you miss these?" She pulled up the conservative

floral-patterned turtleneck shirt she was wearing and shook her breasts at me. I drank them in like a heroin addict welcoming the needle.

"Do you still have my photos? What did you do with them?" I asked, my eyes darting between her face and her puckered, erect, pink nipples.

She dropped her shirt, smoothed it back into place.

"All those pepper seeds we planted on the fire escape came up," she said. "Red ones and green ones and purple ones...they're pretty. I can't remember which are the really hot ones, so I'm afraid to eat any."

That had been a good day, planting peppers, strips of sunlight filtering between the slats of the fire escape stairs.

And for the briefest instant, I considered getting back on the horse and riding the chaos that was life with Deirdre, surrendering to her dark charm, allowing my personal life to mirror the violence that was all around me. If nothing else, I could stop feeling guilty for dumping her.

As soon as I sleep with a woman I feel responsible for her happiness. Pretty much for the rest of my life. I've no idea why that is. Two or three years of therapy would probably uncover the reasons.

I thought of the 911 collection, of her complete lack of distress as she played calls for me. It was a soothing methadone that killed thoughts of reconciliation.

"I'm sorry," I said.

And Deirdre was gone.

I downloaded her bio-vid. I couldn't resist. How would Deirdre present herself to a prospective date? She had a 360° video recorder running almost all the time (for art's sake, of course), so she had recordings of most of her adult life to choose from. Would it be raunchy sex scenes? That awful hostage incident in her apartment building? Was I in it?

I couldn't wait – I played it during the sixty second break before my next date.

It opened with an eleven- or twelve-year-old Deirdre squatting in a little garden on the side of a garage, a wood pile in the background. She pulled a big red tomato and held it up, grinning. The scene drifted into another: An eight-year-old Deirdre sitting cross-legged on a hardwood floor in pajamas, working on a puzzle, pieces spread all around her. Then Deirdre buried in Christmas gifts and torn wrapping paper, sitting beside my sister, Jilly, in front of our tree, both of them grinning wildly. Deirdre, getting on my school bus on the first day of kindergarten, waving goodbye to my mother. Pedaling a big three-wheeled bike, my cousin Jerome standing in the big basket on the back, his hands on her shoulders. On vacation with my family in Puerto Rico, sunburnt in a restaurant with half a dozen leis around her neck. Sitting on the porch of my childhood home, before the tornado carried half of it away.

It was beautifully done, brief moment drifting into brief moment, all of them happy, nostalgic, all of them scenes adapted from my photos, with Deirdre in my place.

I cried as I watched. It was so pathetic. My heart broke for her. Suddenly I wished I could give her some of that childhood – that garden, that puzzle, that vacation, instead of whatever it was shed really gotten. What had she gotten?

I didn't like to imagine what shed gotten. I'd once asked her about the little scar under her chin, and she said it came from the button-eye on her teddy bear, when her stepfather hit her with it.

Maybe she was actually doing well, given the memories she was trying to keep crammed into the basement of her mind. I don't know.

As the images faded to black, I thought again of my conversation with the wheelchair woman, whatever her name had been – Maya. There would be no more childhoods like that for anyone, not when



a kid had to carry a gas mask, pass through security checkpoints, run from a hungry stray dog out of fear that someone had surgically implanted a bomb in it, then trained it to find crowds of people.

A lovely red-haired woman materialized. I was a wet, sobbing mess. I wiped my eyes. She tried not to notice.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm not feeling very well. I'm going to discontinue. It's nothing to do with you."

I terminated my session.

The room seemed dingy and scuffed after the virtual garden. I went on crying, startled by the unfamiliar guttural sound my voice made. I felt my hope for a better tomorrow, for blue skies and a button-nosed girlfriend, slough off like dead skin, leaving me pink and raw.

The selection screen dropped down, startling me. For a long time I just stared at the little pictures of all the women I'd met. Then I started tapping profiles. I didn't look at any of their bio-vids, I just started tapping away at the women I would be interested in dating. Danielle, the Italian happiness-machine; Savita, the Indian princess; three, four, five others.

I hesitated at wheelchair woman.

I sniffed, wiped my nose on my sleeve, stared at her smiling profile.

I felt I had a connection to her. She was my sensei – she'd whapped me with a stick, and I'd awakened to the truth. I tapped her profile. What the hell.

Then I came to Deirdre's profile.

I didn't tap it, and my tape of neurotic Deirdre-thoughts didn't start playing. I felt a warm sadness, that was all.

I read somewhere that we choose to date people for reasons that are lost in our personal histories, and we keep making the same choices – the same mistakes – till we figure out why.

The Civil Defense alarm went off while I was walking home. I pulled out my gas mask and flipped it over my nose and mouth in one deft motion, a gunslinger fast on the draw. People raced indoors – their masks (in a wide variety of colors and styles) and their tight, hunched shoulders made them look like strange chimps.

Six boys in red brick camouflage ran by clutching short square weapons that swung from their fists like lunchboxes. I stepped out of their way. Shit, they were recruiting them younger and younger.

I walked on, enjoying the sun on my face, the light afternoon breeze. I realized that I felt light. I took a deep, easy breath. It felt like adhesions that I hadn't even been aware of had torn free. I hadn't felt like this in a very long time, but I recognized the feeling immediately. It was the M&M feeling.

I fished my phone out of one pocket, the printout of phone numbers for my speed date matches out of another.

"That was quick," Maya said.

"I don't think I can handle the wheelchair; I want to be honest about that and I hope it doesn't hurt your feelings," I said. The honking of the alarm went on in the background.

"OK. Is that what you called to tell me?"

"I just don't want to waste your time. I don't want to hurt anybody. I –"

I wanted to tell her that the world was fleeting and beautiful. I wanted to tell her that the white windmills on the roofs of the exhaust-blackened buildings were all turning in unison, and that somehow she was responsible for me seeing this.

"I'd like to ask you to spend some of your time with me. If you give me some of your time, your precious time, I won't waste it."

She didn't answer. I heard a sniffle and thought she might be crying.

"I'm good at that part – the now part," I added.

"All right." I was right, she was crying. It sounded like she was wiping her nose with a tissue. Then I realized that wasn't possible.

It occurred to me that Maya's bout with Polio-X could have been like my M&M experience. She seemed to get what I was saying.

"I have trouble with the 'till death do us part' part."

"Who's to say how a life is supposed to go?" she said. Yes, that was true. Who's to say?

From our seats in the upper deck the Phillies players looked like tissues dropped in the grass, yet it was so quiet I could hear the shortstop scuff his foot on the infield dirt, smoothing an invisible divot.

I fished for a peanut. Even the crackle of the cellophane bag seemed loud, as if we were in a movie theater. I half-expected someone to shush me as I cracked the peanut under my thumb, peeled off the top half of the shell, popped one red-skinned peanut into my mouth, reached over and fed the second to Maya. She closed her lips over my fingers, grinned when I glanced over at her.

The pitcher wound, threw a high fastball. The lanky batter swung and missed, and the inning was over. No one clapped.

The Mets took the field, and the pitcher began his warm-up tosses.

"Whatever's in the atmosphere, it sure makes the sunsets pretty," Maya said.

"Mm," I said. The sun was setting over the left field fence; the clouds were a gorgeous pastel of pink, peach, indigo, violet.

On the first pitch the Philly batter yanked the ball into the right field corner. The right fielder took a few listless steps after it, then gave up. He squatted on his haunches and watched it roll. He covered his face in his hands as the ball rolled to a stop on the warning track. The center fielder trotted over to him, put a hand on his shoulder, said something to him. The right fielder shook his head.

The batter trotted to second base and stopped, probably figuring that's where he would've ended up if the play had been made. Winning didn't mean as much with so many people dying.

I fished around in my pack and pulled out a camera, snapped a photo of Maya.

"Now let me take one of you," Maya said. I was starting to get used to her paralysis humor.

I smiled big and pointed the camera at myself –

Over the left field wall, there was a flash, and a hot boom. People in the stands screamed, leapt to their feet. The ballplayers sprinted for the dugouts, looking back over their shoulders at the explosion, which was a good twenty blocks away. It looked like an expanding rainbow of colors, like ripples in a candy pond.

I looked at Maya. She smiled, lifted her fingers slightly. I took her hand in mine.

It could be anything – chemical, biological, nuclear, or an accident at a crayon factory.

We waited. I was not afraid.

Besides a previous story in *Interzone*, Will McIntosh has sold fiction to *Block Static* and others. By day Will works as a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University, in the USA.

INTERMISSION

STORIES: GUADALUPE AND HIERONYMUS BOSCH BY RUDY RUCKER • ILLUSTRATED BY RUDY RUCKER

A s an unemployed overweight unmarried overeducated

woman with a big mouth, I don't have a lot of credibility. But even if I was some perfect California Barbie it wouldn't be enough. People never want to listen to women.

I, Glenda Gomez, bring glad tidings. She that hath ears, let her hear.

An alien being has visited our world. Harna is, was, her name. I saw her as a glowing paramecium, a jellyfish, a glass police car, and a demonic art patron. This morning, when she was shaped like a car, I rode inside her to the fifteenth century. And this evening I walked past the vanishing point and saved our universe from Harna's collecting bag. I'm the queen of space and time. I'm trying to write up my story to pitch as a reality TV show.

Let's start with paramecia. Unicellular organisms became a hobby of mine a few months ago when I stole a microscope from my job. I was sorting egg and sperm cells for an infertility clinic called Smart Stork. Even though I don't have any kind of biology background they trained me.

I'm not dumb. I have a Bachelor's in Art History from San Jose State, which is just a few blocks from my apartment on Sixth Street. Well, almost a degree. I never finished the general education courses or my senior seminar, which would probably, certainly, have been on Hieronymus Bosch. I used to have a book of his pictures I looked at all the time – although today the book disappeared. At first I thought it was hidden under something. My apartment is a sty.

My lab job didn't last long – I'm definitely not the science type. I wasn't fast enough, I acted bored, I kissed the manager Dick Went after one too many lunchtime Coronas – and he fired me. That's when I bagged my scope – a binocular phase-contrast Leica. I carried it home in my ever-ready XXL purse. Later that day Dick came to my apartment to ask about it, but I screamed through the door at him like a crazy person until he went away. Works on the landlord, too.

Now that I have a microscope, I keep infusions of protozoan cultures in little jars all over my apartment. It's unbelievably easy to grow the infusions. You just put a wad of lawn grass in with some bottled water. Bacteria breed themselves into the trillions – rods and dots and corkscrews that I can see at 200x. And before you know it, the paramecia are right there digging on the bacilli. They come out of nowhere. What works really well is to add a scrap of meat to an infusion, it gets dark and pukeful, and the critters go wild for a few days till they die of their own shit. In the more decadent infusions you'll find a particular kind of very coarsely ciliated paramecium rolling and rushing around. My favorites. I call them the microhomies.

So today is a Sunday morning in March and I'm eating my usual breakfast of day-old bread with slices of welfare cheddar, flipping through my Bosch book thinking about my next tattoo. A friend named Sleepy is taking an on-line course in tattooing, and he said he'd give me one for free. He has a good flea-market tattoo-gun he traded a set of tires for. Who needs snow tires in San Jose? So I'm thinking it would be bitchin' to bedizen my belly with a Bosch.

I'm pretty well settled on this blue bagpipe bird with a horn for his nose. It'll be something to talk about, and the bagpipe will be like naturalistic on my *gordo* gut, maybe it'll minimize my



girth. But the bird needs a background pattern. Over my fourth cup of microwave coffee, I start thinking about red blood cells, remembering from the lab how they're shaped. I begin digging on the concept of rounding out my Bosch bird tattoo with a blood-cell tiling.

To help visualize it, I pinprick my pinkie and put a droplet on a glass slide under my personal Glenda Gomez research scope. I see beautiful shades of orange and red from all my little blood cells massed together. Sleepy will need to see this in order to fully grasp what to do. I want to keep on looking, but the blood is drying fast. The cells are bursting and cracks are forming among them as they dry. I remember that at Smart Stork we'd put some juice on the slides with the cells to keep them perky. I don't know what kind of juice, but I decide to try a drop of water out of one of my infusions, a dark funky batch that I'd fed with a KFC chicken nugget.

The infusion water is teeming with those tough-looking paramecia with the coarse bristles – the microhomies. What with Bosch on my brain, the microhomies resemble tiny bagpipes on crutches. I'm like: tattoo *them* onto my belly too? While I'm watching the microhomies, they start digging on my ruptured blood cells. "Yo," I say, eyeing an especially bright and lively one. "You're eating me."

And that's when it happens. The image loses its focus, I feel a puff of air, my skin tingles all over. Leaning back, I see a bag of glowing light grow out from the microscope slide. It's a foot across.

I jump to my feet and back off. I may be heavy, but I'm still quick. At first I have the idea my apartment is on fire, and then for some reason I think of earthquakes. I'm heading for the door.

But the glowing sack gets there before me, blocking the exit. I try to reach through it for the doorknob.

As soon as my hand is inside the lumpy glow I hear a woman's voice. "Glenda! Hello dear."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Harna from Hilbert space." She has a prim voice; I visualize flowery dresses and pillbox hats. "I happened upon your

GUADALUPE

AND HIERONYMUS BOSCH BY RUDY RUCKER



RUDY-03

brane several – days – ago. I've been teeming with the microlife, a bit humdrum, and I thought that's all there is to see in this location. Worth documenting, but no more than that. I had no idea that only a few clicks up the size scale I'd find a gorgeous entity like you. Scale is tricky for me, what with everything in Hilbert space being infinite. Thank goodness I happened upon your blood cell. Oh, *warmest* greetings, Glenda Gomez. You're – why, you're collectible, my dear."

I'm fully buggin'. I run to the corner of my living-room, staring at the luminous paramecium the size of a dog in mid-air. "Go away," I say.

Harna wobbles into the shape of a jellyfish with dangling frilly ribbons. She drifts across the room, not quite touching the floor, dragging her oral arms across the stuff lying on my tables, checking things out. And then she gets to my Bosch book, which is open to *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

"A nonlinear projection of three-space to two-space," burbles Harna, feeling the paper all over. "Such a clever map. Who's the author?"

"Hieronymus Bosch," I murmur. "It's called perspective." I'm half-wondering if my brain has popped and I'm alone here talking to myself. Maybe I'm about to start fingerpainting the floor with Clorox. Snorting Ajax up my nose.

"Bosch?" muses Harna. Her voice is fruity and penetrating like my old guidance counselor's. "And I just know you have a crush on him, Glenda! I can tell. When can I meet him?"

"He lived a long time ago," I whisper. I'm stepping from side to side, trying to find a clear path to the door.

"Most excellent," Harna is saying. "You'll time-snatch him, and then I can use the time-flaw to perspective-map your whole spacetime brane down into a sack! Yummy! You are so cute, Glenda. Yes, I'm going to wrap you up and take you home!"

I get past her and run out into the street. I'm breathing hard, still in my nightgown, now and then looking over my shoulder. So of course a San Jose police car pulls over and sounds me on their speaker. They think I'm a tweaker or a nut-job. Did I mention that it's Sunday morning?

"Ma'am. Can we help you? Ma'am. Please come over to the police car and place your hands on the hood. Ma'am." More cop-voice crackle in the background and here comes Harna down the sidewalk, still shaped like a flying jellyfish, though bigger than before. The cops can't see her, though.

"Ma'am." One of them gets out of the car, a kid with a cop mustache. He looks kind, concerned, but his hand is on the butt of his Taser.

I whirl, every cop's image of a madwoman, pointing back down the sidewalk at the swollen Harna, who's shaping herself into a damn good replica of the cops' car. She's made of glowing haze and hanging at an angle to the ground.

Right before the cop grabs my wrist or Tasers me, Harna sweeps over and – pixie-dust! I'm riding in a Gummi-Bear cop car, with Harna talking to me from the radio grill. The cops don't see me any more. Harna heads down the street, then swerves off parallel to spacetime. She guns her mill and we're rumbling through a *wah-wah* collage of years and centuries, calendar leaves flying, the sun flickering off and on, Earth rushing around the Sun in a blur. And it's not just time we're traveling through, we're rolling through some miles as well. We arrive in the Lowlands of 1475.

It's a foggy dawn, Jerome Bosch is at his bedroom window, arcing

a stream of pee toward the glow of the rising sun. I know from books that Hieronymus was just his fancy show name, and that his homies called him Jerome. Like my given name is Guadalupe – but everyone calls me Glenda. Seeing the man in the window, my heart does a little handstand. My love has guided us all this way.

"He is scrumptious," says Harna.

As he lowers his nightshirt, Jerome's gaze drifts away from the horizon – and he sees us. His expression is calm, resigned – it's like he's always been expecting a flying jellyfish/cop-car carrying a good-looking woman from the next millennium. Calm, yes, but he's moving back from the window hella fast.

Harna flips out a long vortex of force, a tornado that fastens onto Jerome and pulls him to us. He's hanging in the air a few feet away from me, slowly spinning – and yelling in what must be Dutch.

"Grab your fella," says Harna. "It has to be you who lands him. It's not for me to meddle in a brane's spacetime."

The wind has flopped Bosch's hair back. His cheekbones are high, his lips are thin, his eyes are bright. The man for me. I reach out and catch hold of his hand. It's warm.

Harna's light flows down my arm and up Jerome's. Augmented by Harna, I'm strong as a steam-shovel. I set Bosch down on the yellow car seat next to me.

"It's too soon," he says, clear as day. "I'm not ready."

"I'm Glenda," I say, not all that surprised he's speaking English. Another Harna miracle. "Ready or not, I'm taking you home."

"To Hell!" exclaims Jerome. "That's quite unjust. Only yesterday I was absolved by the priest. My sins in these last hours have been but petty ones. A touch of anger at the neighbor's dog, my usual avarice for a truly great commission, and the accustomed fires of lust, of course –" As he mentions this last sin, he looks down my nightgown, which I'm just loving. I press his hand against my warm thigh.

"Don't worry, sweetie. I don't live in Hell. I live in San Jose."

For the rest of the ride, Jerome is busy looking around, taking everything in. What eyes he has! So sharp and smart and alert. What with the time-winds flapping my flimsy, he can see I'm all woman. I'm doing my best to keep the fabric cinched in around the problem areas at my waist, and I'm trying to get his arms around me, but he's kind of reluctant. He's uneasy about whether we're bound, I can dig it.

Finally Harna sets us down in the sunny street outside my apartment. Lucky me, the cops are gone. Everything looks the same – the dead palm leaves, the beater cars and pickups, the dusty jasmine vines, the broken glass on the dry clay, the 7-11 store, the university parking garage – sunny and dry.

Harna rises into the air and spreads out, layering herself across the scene like extra sunshine. No doubt she'll be back in some more personal form pretty soon. But meanwhile I've got me a man. I smile at Jerome and give his arm a happy squeeze.

"This is Spain?" he wonders.

"America," I tell him, which doesn't seem to ring a bell. "The new world across the Atlantic Ocean, plus some five centuries past your time."

He shakes his head, and stares around like a bird fallen from its nest. "It's after the Second Coming?" he asks. "Christ has dominion over the Earth?"

"The Church is doing fine," I say, not sure where this is going. We shouldn't stand around the street in our nightgowns. "Come on inside."

I hustle him up the stairs into my apartment and first of all get us in some clothes. I dress him in my favorite vintage red

Ramon's T-shirt and my yellow SJSU sweat pants. Me, I put on some nice tight Capri pants with a Lycra tummy panel and a pink baby-doll blouse that's loose at the bottom. Truth be told, I do a certain amount of my shopping in the maternity section at Target.

In the kitchen I offer Jerome some Oreos and microwave two cups of instant coffee. Buzz! The microwave is built into the wall so we delinquent renters can't hock it. Jerome overlooks the futuristic aspects of my kitchen because he's busy holding one of the cookies up to the light, studying the embossed writing and curlicues.

"They're food," I tell him. I rotate one in two and give him the better half. He scarfs it down – and I'm secretly glad, thinking that we've broken bread together now. Jerome takes another Oreo and eats the whole thing. They're gettin' good to him.

Meanwhile I touch up my black lipstick and lip liner. All the time I'm watching him. Even though he's from a long time ago, he's not old. Maybe twenty-five. He would have still been at the start of his career. No reason he can't have as good a career here in San Jose with me.

Jerome watches me right back. His gaze is warm and alive, as if there's an extra brain inside each eyeball. After a bit he fixates on my mug of colored pencils, looking at them the way I wish he was looking at my boobs.

"Want to draw?" I ask him. "You can decorate my walls." There's two smooth blank walls in my living-room, a short wall across from the hall door and a big one across from the window.

"A mural?" says Jerome, examining a couple of the pencils. "Bingo."

He starts in on the smaller wall. And me, I sit down with pen and paper at my round table on the one chair I've got. I want to try and start documenting some of this unfurling madness. For sure there's a reality TV show in this. All my friends say I should be on TV, and who am I to disagree. I recite a prayer to give me courage to write.

"Hail Glenda, full of grace, an alien paramecium was with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of your brain, *Glenda And Jerome*."

I lean over my spiral notebook, pen in hand.

To whom it may concern:

It may interest you to know that...

Is it Hie or Hei? Love has made me dyslexic.

I look around, trying to find the book that turned Harna on to Jerome, but I can't see it just now. Thinking about the book. I have to grin, thinking how incredible it is to have the artist himself here with me.

"Hey, Jerome. I'm writing about you."

"Not yet," he says and taps his thumb with his finger. Like that's the Lowlands chill-it gesture. He's holding a purple pencil in his other hand. Getting started on marking up my little wall. Holding the pencil gives him power, aplomb. He's a suspicious genius with sharp eyes and a trapdoor mouth. I keep talking to him.

"It's fabulous that you're drawing, Jerome. This hole will be an art grotto. I hope they don't paint it over when we move." And surely we will be moving quite soon, with Jerome pulling in the Old Master bucks. We'll be on TV. We'll get a condo in one of those beautiful new buildings across from the SJSU library on Fourth Street.

I smile at Jerome and fluff my hair a little. I wear it long and black with henna highlights and Bettie Page bangs. Too bad I didn't happen to shampoo and condition it yet this week. I look sexier when my mane is lustrous.

Jerome thins his lips and shades the outstretched arms of a little man. He's digging on the excellent twenty-first-century quality of my pencils and the luscious smooth whiteness of apartment dry-wall. Sketching a picture of Harna and me snatching him. Harna looks like a fish as much as a car. She's surrounded by glow-lines of blue light. Her prey is just now seeing the shape in the sky, he's holding out his arms with that odd look of non-surprise. His unmade bachelor bed is in the far corner of his room. The vortex from the aeriform is gonna cartwheel him into the arms of a voluptuous dark-haired sorceress. Me!

"You're cute," I tell Jerome. He pinches the fingers of one hand at me again, the other hand busy with my pencils. He draws terrifically fast. I'm really glad I bagged him. But I wish he looked a little happier about it.

"Why don't we get to know each other better?" I say, imagining he might pick up on my tone. I unbutton my baby-doll blouse enough so he can see my boobs – but not the runaway rolls of my stomach. My breasts are a major plus, easily the equal of Pammy Anderson's. And they're natural.

But Jerome looks away. It occurs to me that maybe he still thinks this is Hell – which would make me a demoness. I decide to play up to that. I cackle at him and beckon with witchy fingers, the light glinting on my chipped black nails. My fingers are quite shapely, another plus feature. But they're not bringing Jerome Bosch into my arms.

So I go get him. He tries to escape, racing around the apartment like a sparrow that flew in the window. I shoo him into my bedroom and – *plop* – we're mixed in with the sheets, magazines and laundry on my bed.

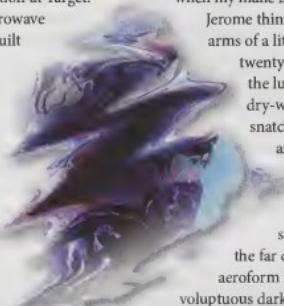
I give him a wet kiss and pull down my stretchy pants – keeping my top on so as to minimize that troublesome abdominal area. Of course I'm not wearing panties, I've been planning this all along. I tug down his sweat pants – and there's his goodies on display. A twenty-five-year-old fella here in bed with me, the answer to a maiden's prayer. I roll him on top of me and pull him in. It's been a while.

But – just my luck – this turns into a totally screwed-up proposition. He comes, maybe, and then he's limp, and then – oh, God – he starts sobbing like his heart is going to break.

Poor Jerome. I cuddle him and whisper to him. His sobs slow down, he whimpering, he slides off to one side and – falls asleep!

I feel down between my legs, trying to figure out if he delivered. What a thing it would be to carry Hieronymus Bosch's baby! That would tie him to me for sure. I think I'm ovulating today, as a matter of fact. Just for luck, I twist around and prop my feet up on the wall, giving the Dutch Master's wrigglers every opportunity to work their way up to the hidden jewel of my egg.

Resting there, thinking things over, I can visualize them, pointy-nosed with beating tails, talking to each other in Dutch, enjoying themselves in Glenda-land, on a pilgrimage to my Garden of Earthly Delights.



He keeps on sleeping, and I amble back into the kitchen to make myself a grilled cheese sandwich. I'm happy, but at the same time I have this bad feeling that Harna somehow tricked me. That stuff about wrapping me up and taking me home. Some weird shit is gonna come down, I just know it.

But now here comes Jerome out the bedroom, looking mellower than before. Our little hump and cuddle has helped his mind-set.

"Greetings, Glenda," he says. "I enjoyed our venery."

"Likewise." He looks so cute and inquisitive that I run over and kiss his cheek. And I can't help asking, "You don't think I'm too fat?"

"You're well-fed," he says, cupping my boobs. "Clean and healthy. But do you worship Satan? Your spirit-familiar Harna – surely she is unholy."

"I don't know much about Harna," I admit. "She only appeared today. And Satan? Naw, dog. I'm a Catholic girl." Fallen away. I don't mention. I cross myself and he's relieved.

"I can go home?" he asks, glancing out the window at the quiet street in the noon sun.

"You belong with me," I tell him. "I'll give you a baby. You never had one back then. I love your art. You're mucho famous here, you know. I have a whole book of your pictures."

I root around the apartment, wanting to show him, but damn it, that book is totally gone. I'm guessing that Harna took it. She was saying something about copying Jerome's perspective maps so she can – fit our world into a sack? That has to be wack. If only she's gone for good. Maybe hoping hard enough can make it so. I skip over to Jerome and kiss him again. He lets me.

"I can't find my book, but we can go to the SJSU library," I tell him. "It's just across the campus and they're open on Sunday. And I think the Art Mart is open today too. I'll buy you some paint."

"Buy paint?" says Jerome. "I mix my own."

"We get it in tubes," I say. "Like sausage. Ready-made. Here, you eat a grilled cheese sandwich too, and then we'll look for Hieronymus Bosch books in the library."

Well, guess what we find under BOSCH, HIERONYMUS, in the library? Not jack shit. When Harna and I abducted him from the fifteenth-century Dutch town of s'Hertogenbosch and carried him to twenty-first century San Jose, California, we wiped out his role in history. Maybe he finished one or two minor paintings before we nabbed him, but as far as the history of art is concerned, he never lived. Jerome doesn't really pick up on how weird this is – I mean all he's seen me do is look at an incomprehensible-to-a-medieval-mind online card catalog, and we nabbed him before he was famous anyway, so he's not feeling the loss. But me, I feel it bad.

Bosch was a really important artist, you know – or maybe you don't. Come to think of it, I might be the only one who remembers our world before I changed our history. But take it from me, Hieronymus Bosch was King. The Elvis of artists. His work influenced a lot of people in all kinds of ways over the centuries.

More ways than I'd imagined.

Because now, walking off the campus and getting a coffee, I'm paying attention and I'm noticing differences in our non-Bosch world. There aren't any ads for horror movies in the paper, for instance, which is way odd.

The Episcopal church that used to be by the coffee shop is a pho noodle parlor. On a hunch, I look in the yellow pages in the coffee shop, and there's no Episcopal or Baptist or Proletarian or whatever churches in town at all. With no Bosch, the Protestant thing never

happened! The sisters that whipped me through grade school would be happy, but I'm thinking, *Dear God, what have I done?*

The cars are different too, duller than before, and every single one of them is cream-colored, not even any silver or maroon.

The barrista in the coffee shop who usually wears foundation and drawn-on eyebrows has her face bare as a granola hippie's. And her hair is all bowl-cut and sensible. Ugh. The world is definitely lagging without the cumulative influences of my man Jerome.

On the plus side, you can smoke in the coffee shop now, and all the cigarettes are fat and laced with nutmeg and clove, which I dig. The Supertaqueria next door isn't selling tongue anymore, also fine by me. The fonts on the signs are somehow lower and fatter and more, like, Sanskrit-looking. The people in the magazine ads are wearing more clothes, and generally heavier.

Hey, I can live with some change, if that's what it takes to get Glenda her man.

I buy Jerome a canvas and some acrylics at the Art Mart – putting them on a new credit card that some pinheads mailed me last week. Back home, my Dutch Master sniffs suspiciously at the paint, preparing to start layering the stuff over the colored drawing on my smaller wall.

There's a knock on the door. I've been expecting this. I peep through the peephole and it's Harna, looking just like her voice sounds, like a rich old white woman in a flowery dress and pillbox hat. I don't want to let her in, but she walks right through the closed door.

"Hello, Glenda and Jerome," goes Harna. "I have a commission for the artist." She plumps a velvet sack right down on my kitchen table. Clink of gold coins. Perfectly calculated to get Jerome's juices flowing.

"What kind of painting do you need, my lady?" asks Jerome, setting down his paintbrush and making a greedy little bow.

"A picture of that," she says, pointing out the window to Sixth Street and the San Jose cityscape. "With full perspective accuracy. You can paint it – there." She points to my big blank living-room wall.

"How soon would you need it?" asks Jerome.

"By sundown," says Harna.

"He can't paint that fast," I protest.

"I'll speed him up," says Harna, with a twitch of her dowager lips. "I'll return with the rising of the moon."

Sure enough, Jerome starts racing around the room like a cockroach when the light comes on, pausing only long enough to ask me to get him more paint.

When I come back from the Art Mart with a shopping bag of paint tubes, he's already roughed in an underpainting of the street – the houses with their tile and shingle roofs, the untrimmed palm trees, the dead dingy cars, the vines, a few passers-by captured in motion, the tops of the houses in the next block, the houses after them, the low brown haze from the freeways, and beyond that the golden-grassed foothills and the blank blue sky.

He's all over the wall, and the painting is so perfect and beautiful I can hardly stand it. Every ten seconds, it seems like, he darts over to the window, then darts back. He's such a nut that he's putting in every single person and car that goes past, so the picture is getting more and more crowded.

The sun is going down and a few lights come on in the windows outside. Somehow Jerome is keeping up with it, changing his painting to match the world, touching the buildings with sunset gold, damping the shadows into warmer shades, pinkening the sky – and then darkening it.

A fat full moon comes up over the foothills and, quick as a knife, Jerome paints it onto my wall, sprinkling stars all around it. And then Harna's in the room again.

"It's enough," she says. "He can stop."

Jerome cranks down to normal speed. I hand him more Oreos and coffee. He slugs down the nourishment, then drinks a quart of water from the sink.

"What happens now?" I ask Harna.

"Like I said before," she answers, not looking so much like a human anymore. Her pink skin is peeling away in patches, and underneath she's green. "I'm going to bag you and your world and take you home. Don't worry, it won't hurt."

And then she shoots out of the window and disappears into the distance past the moon.

"We have to stop her!" I tell Jerome, picking up my purse.

"What?" he says. He sounds tired.

"We have to run after Harna."

Jerome looks at me for a long time. And then he smiles. "If you say so, Glenda. Being with you is interesting."

The two of us run down the apartment stairs and right away I can see that things are seriously weird. The cars across the street are two-thirds as big as the cars on my side.

"Hurry," I tell Jerome, and we run around the corner to the next block. The houses on that next street are half the size of the houses on my street. We run another block, which takes only a couple of seconds, as each block is way smaller than the one before. The houses are only waist high. We go just a little further and now we're stepping right over the houses, striding across a block at a time.

Another step takes us all the way across Route 101, the step after that across east San Jose. The further from Jerome's picture we get, the smaller things are.

"Perspective!" exclaims Jerome. "The world has shrunk to perspective!"

We hop over the foothills. And now it gets really crazy. With one last push of our legs, we leap past the moon. It's a pale yellow golf ball near our knees. We're launched into space, man. The stars rush past, all of them, denser and denser — zow — and then we're past everything, beyond the vanishing point, out at infinity.

Clear white light, firm as Jell-O, and you can stand wherever you like. Up where it's the brightest, I see a throna and a bearded man in it, just like in Jerome's paintings. It's God, with Jesus beside Him, and between them is the Dove, which I never did get. Right below the Trinity is my own Virgin of Guadalupe, with wiggly yellow lines all around her. And up above them all are my secret guardians, the Powerpuff Girls from my favorite Saturday morning cartoon. Jerome sees them too. We clasp hands. I know deep inside myself that now forever we two are married. I'm crying my head off.

But somebody jostles me, it's Harna right next to us, pushing and grunting, trying to wrestle our whole universe into a brown sack. She's the shape of a green Bosch-goblin with a slit mouth.

I turn off the waterworks and whack Harna up the side of the head with my purse. Jerome crouches down and butts her in the stomach. Passing the vanishing point has made us about as strong as our enemy, the demon universe-collector. While she's reeling back, I quick get hold of her sack and shake its edges free of our stars.



Harna comes at me hot and heavy, with smells and electric shocks and thumps on my butt. Jerome goes toe-to-toe with her, shoving her around, but she's starting to hammer on his head pretty good. Just then I notice a brush and tubes of white and blue paint in my purse. I hand them to Jerome and while I use some Extreme Wrestling moves from TV on Harna, Jerome quick paints a translucent blue sphere around her with a cross on top — a spirit trap.

I shove the last free piece of Harna fully inside the ball and, presto, she's neutralized. With a hissing, farting sound she dwindles from our view, disappearing in a direction different from any that we can see. I wave one time to the Trinity, the Virgin and the Powerpuff Girls, and, how awesome, they wave back. And then we're outta there.

The walk home is a little tricky — that first step in particular, where you go from infinity back into normal space, is a tough one. But we make it.

As soon as we're in my apartment, I help Jerome slap some house-paint over his big mural. And when we go outside to check on things, everything is back to being its own right size. We've saved our universe.

To celebrate, we get some Olde Antwerpen forty-ouncers at the 7-11 and hop into my bed, cuddling together at one end leaning against the wall. I'm kind of hoping Jerome will want to get it on, but right now he seems a little tired. Not too tired to check out my boobs though.

Just when it might start to get interesting, here comes Harna's last gasp. I can't see her any more, but I can hear her voice, and so can Jerome. "Have it your way," intones the prissy universe-collector. "Keep your petty world. But the restoration must be in full. Before I leave for good, Hieronymus must go home."

"Think I'll stay here," says Jerome, who's holding a tit in one hand and a beer in the other.

"Back," says Harna, and her presence disappears for good.

As she leaves, the living breathing man next to me turns into — oh hell — an art book.

"No way," I sob. "I need him." I quick say the Hail Mary three times, like the sisters taught me. But the Bosch book just sits there. I pour some of the microhomies onto it. Nothing doing. I squeeze red paint onto the book cover and stick a split Oreo cookie to it. Still no good. And then in desperation, I pray to my special protectors, the Powerpuff Girls. And the day's last miracle begins.

The book twitches in my hands, throbs, splits in two, and the two copies move apart, making a, like, hyperdimensional man-hole.

And, yes, pushing his way out of the hole, here comes my Hieronymus Bosch, his hair flopping, his eyes sharp, his mouth thin with concentration.

He's in my bed — and the dumb book is gone. Screw art history. Jerome will make even better paintings than before. And if that doesn't work out, there's reality TV.

You know anybody who can help with my show?

Rudy's most recent novel is *Frek and the Elixir*, published by Tor (paperback out now). His next novel, *Mathematicians in Love*, will also be published by Tor, some time in 2006. For information on these and Rudy's twenty-six other books, not to mention stories and paintings, visit his website at www.rudyrucker.com.

INTERMISSION

STORIES | SAVING MARS BY JASON STODDARD | ILLUSTRATED BY GLITCHWERK

GUILT, Evan McMaster watched himself lie at ten times life-size on the wallscreen of the Interglobal Transport boardroom.

"Jere and I started this," his image said.

The scene dissolved to show a squatty little rocket on a launch-pad in desert scrub. It flared to life, lifted free of its concrete prison and began a slow ascent into the darkening sky. The rocket corkscrewed and disappeared in a silent fireball. Thunder came moments later.

Evan's voice cut through the last remnants of the explosion. "But Jere and I never intended it to be like this."

The wallscreen showed similar scenes of spacecraft, from slim needles, to sleek delta-winged craft, to more squat and functional shapes. Each one rose, faltered, exploded.

Evan's voice, thick with emotion: "They talk about new

Overlay of photos of deformed babies, probably taken from the aftermath of the latest Saudi war.

The screen dissolved to Evan sitting at home. A banner identified him: EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, WINNING MARS.

"I wanted the new frontier," Evan said. "But I never intended for anyone to be hurt."

Another image of a rocket, exploding against night-black skies.

"This is why I support the Global Launch Safety Initiatives."

Images of clean, white-suited technicians, poring over a sleek delta-winged craft that bore Interglobal Transport's Earth-Mars logo.

"The GLSI promises safe space transport to everyone," Evan said.

"Since the US and EU have adopted GLSI, we haven't had a single launch accident. And some feel threatened."

SAVING MARS

manufacturing paradigms. Leveraging the power of collaborative swarms with near-free labor in unregulated parts of the world. But is this true?

The screen cut to a delta-winged craft pointing down a fresh black runway cut into jungle. The camera zoomed in on a tanker truck that spilled clear fluid on the runway, while men wearing stained T-shirts ran frantically.

Cut back to Evan's face, folded in an origami of grief. Tears sparkled at the corners of his eyes.

"This is a magnificent performance," Charles Govern, CEO of Interglobal Transport, said.

"CG, of course," Evan said.

"What does that mean?"

Fuck, is anyone still this prehistoric? Evan thought.

"Shh," Evan said, and pointed at the screen.

Onscreen, Evan said, "But what is the cost? Seventeen new deaths this year. Hundreds before that."

The screen showed a diagram of Earth-to-Mars flight, with hazards called out in flashing yellow triangles. "And how many that make it to orbit actually complete the journey? We have no statistics." Infographic about radiation exposure and genetic damage. "And if they complete the journey, what other hazards do they face? Whether their lives are shattered during launch - -"

The screen cut to show crying families holding up banners: SUPPORT GLOBAL SAFETY! One grandmother, her face puckered in grief, held a photo of a couple and their children, presumably her own.

" - or are yet to be shattered."

Cut to an image of an angry man, wearing a jumpsuit with the name of PERFORMANCE LAUNCHES, INC. on it. "They're trying to legislate us out of existence. The GLSI doesn't make anyone safer. It just keeps everyone except for its premier members from launching."

"And you aren't a premier member?" an offscreen voice said.

"They sent in an army of inspectors. Seventy-three violations. Stupid stuff. Can't afford it..."

Cut back to Evan, shaking his head sadly. "If they can't afford to be safe, what can they afford?"

Freezeframe. The glowing pixels of Evan's sad, serious face lit the boardroom, giving the long blondewood table a bright sodium glow.

Charles Govern stood up to pace. "Will that do it?" he said.

"Do you know my media swing rating?"

"I know aircraft. Spacecraft."

"Based on projections, it'll move public sentiment fourteen to eighteen points towards favoring the GLSI in non-compliant countries," Evan said.

"In English, please."

"Yes."

Charles nodded. "No infostamp from 411, I notice."

Evan shook his head. "Not since the fiasco."

"What fiasco?"

What a total mediavoid, Evan thought. "The girl's school? Oversight arresting them as terrorists based on 411's info?"

Charles paled. "I hadn't heard."

"The arrests weren't the big problem. The fact that they were retrained was. 411 should've admitted bad data sooner."

"So no stamp."

"Net media preference is swinging back to indepundits and inpersons, anyway. It's OK if others refute it, even with 411 stamps. You're banking on my swing."

Charles nodded and switched the screenwall to show images of their launch transport factories in India and China, where clean, blue-overalled men swarmed over Interglobal Transport's own delta-winged craft. A scrolling banner on the bottom noted: INTERGLOBAL TRANSPORT: PLATINUM FOUNDER OF THE GLOBAL LAUNCH SAFETY INITIATIVES.

"What happens when the independents do their own media blitz?"

Evan nodded. "We'll plant our own refutes and have the addicted swarm do some easy discredits. We'll Barnum it out. The newshaze will swing our way."

Charles nodded. "I didn't understand a thing you said."

"You don't have to."

"But it'll work."

Evan smiled. "Just you wait."

FLIGHT Jason Fraser unplugged his wallet from the charging base and thumbed it to the photobank of Lara. This morning, it chose to show him a photo of them when they first arrived in Ecuador, squinting into the bright sun outside the Quito internet café. Her golden hair was matted and stringy from the open-air cab ride, but her brilliant smile made her beautiful.

Beautiful beyond measure, Jason thought, squeezing back the tears.

He knew he should just delete the photobank. But after Oversight, his images might be the only thing left of her. She was erased from Earth, as if she had never been there.

Jason opened his eyes and looked at the blank white wall of the tiny cabin. *Enterprise Nine* had stopped boosting long ago, and the ship was quiet except for the rattle of fans in the ventilators and the murmur of voices through the thin walls.

"Daddy, it's hissing!" Kaila said, leaping through the door of the cabin and grabbing his hand.

"What?"

BY JASON STODDARD



BOARDROOM

ISSUE 200

INTERZONE

"The hall. It's hissing."

She dragged him out into the long, curved hall that served as a spine for the passenger quarters. Jason stumbled in the light centrifugal gravity; Kaila virtually flew.

"See," she said, pointing at a seam where the wall met the floor. A high-pitched hissing noise came from it.

We're leaking, Jason thought. I'm standing on space and we're leaking.

"Daddy?"

We're leaking!

"What do we do?"

Jason's heart pounded, but he forced himself to smile. "We need to find someone in the crew."

They climbed up into the weightless part of the ship and found the captain, a big blond man, playing poker with a woman they'd been introduced to as the co-pilot.

"We're leaking," Jason said. His voice quavered.

The captain rolled his eyes. "Didn't you see the sealant?"

"Sealant?"

"Every four meters along the passenger hall. Blue case. Marked SEAL-TITE."

"You want us to do it?" Jason said.

"You never caulked a shower?"

"Uh. No."

The captain sighed and squirted out of his chair. "Show me."

Jason took him to the leak. It was right underneath one of the blue boxes. The captain opened it and took a caulking gun out. It

ENTERPRISE NINE



held a tube of silicone with a HOME DEPOT logo on it.

The captain squeezed a generous blob of silicone on the crack and spread it with his thumb. The hissing stopped.

"Is that safe?" Jason said.

A shrug. "Safer to spin down the passenger donut, but you guys want grav, so you get grav."

When the captain had stomped away, Kaila asked, "Are we going to be all right, Daddy?"

"Yes," Jason said. Forcing himself to smile.

SHOW Jere Gutierrez sat on the edge of his father's bed. Late-afternoon sun slashed through trees outside the guest house's windows, painting the handmade Indian bedcover in stripes of light and dark.

"I should go to the hospital," Ron said.

Jere sighed. The same old argument.

"I should," Ron said.

"What do you want for dinner?" Jere said.

"Youth, with a side of rice."

Jere turned to look out the window. Dust motes danced in the shaft of sunlight. The skyline of Los Angeles rose, ghostlike, in the afternoon haze.

"Send me away," Ron said.

"Stop."

"I'm destroying your life."

"I have an interview tomorrow," Jere said.

Ron laughed, a harsh, ratcheting sound. Jere turned to look at his father. He seemed tiny, shriveled. Jere fought to keep the tears from welling.

"The man who won Mars, having to beg for jobs from Hollywood assholes," Ron said. "Oh, the irony."

"We're all Hollywood assholes," Jere said.

"Put me in a hospital."

"No."

"That's where I should be."

"Shut up!" Jere said. The hospitals would run the numbers and see he was over the median age for someone of his history and habits. They'd call up long scrolling lists of treatments he'd undergone, visits he'd made, drugs he'd been given, dating back to the turn of the century or even before. And somewhere deep in the silicon heart of USG Oversight, a small decision would be made. An unimportant decision in the vast scheme of things. A decision that meant nothing to anyone but Ron. And Jere.

"Jere, I'm destroying your life," Ron said.

There's nothing left to destroy, Jere thought. "Chinese it is," he said.

"Jere –"

"No more arguments," Jere said, standing. He could feel Ron's eyes on his back as he walked out.

In the kitchen of Jere's main house, the flatscreen was blinking discreetly for attention. Jere thumbed it on, hoping it might be Pamela. What he always hoped.

Instead, it displayed the icon of Its-Ur-Life, an irrepressibly bouncy thing done in primary colors and an animation style over a decade old. "Your lifelog has been updated!" it cried at him, larger than life, through the house's media system.

Fuck me, Jere thought. "Play clip," he said.

Late-afternoon sun slashed through the window, blowing out shadows in the low-res video feed. There was a warble as the audio auto-adjusted, then Ron's words came clear: "...to the hospital."

"Delete clip," Jere said.

"Deletion not permitted. No user rights."

"Fuck off! Fuck the fuck off, then!" Jere said, pounding on the countertop.

"That command is offensive. It has been logged."

Jere shook his head as Its-Ur-Life reverted to the main Jere Gutierrez screen. It showed thumbnails of hundreds of snippets from Jere's life. Some archival, like the news clip of him and Evan standing there on the day that *Winning Mars* ended. The launch of the *Mayflower*, and Jere's commentary on it. Scenes from the first grim colonists. Then stuff from the lifelogger. His first fight with Pamila, that honeymoon night in France. Speaking in front of wide-eyed high-school kids about the possibilities that awaited them in space. Neteno's bankruptcy hearings. The Thanksgiving of Ron's first heart attack. Christmas in the hospital. More of Ron in the little guest-house.

Fuck-o-matic. He'd swept for the latest flycams before seeing his dad. Which meant there was something new out there, some camera his hardware couldn't detect. Which meant he was fucked until the updates to his bugsweepers came out.

It was no use protesting to Its-Ur-Life. The company was long-defunct. Only its products still lived on, with a tenaciousness that seemed almost diabolical. Maybe one day he'd find a ghostbuster to purge that damned lifelogger off the net once and for all. Preferably before Ron died, and it was broadcast for the world to see.

Your whole life is a show now, Jere thought.

Oh, the irony.

LEVER » "We're pleased with the progress of the GLSI," Samuel Emerson said. The hot Southern California sun threw sharp highlights off his full head of silver hair. He was the chairman of the board of Interglobal Transport.

"That's good," Evan said, squinting at the far-off green of the #4 hole of the TPC Valencia golf course. After a long trip on the disintegrating freeways, dodging burns trying to sell spray-painted plasma screens as art, he was all for making the most of this invitation.

"We're worried about your other plans."

Evan lined up for his drive, saying nothing.

"You sound like those nutos who moved their company HQ to Mars so they can declare themselves tax-free."

Evan swung. The ball flew long and low, hooking slightly. Into the rough. He frowned. "Unless they plan on moving to Mars themselves, they're going to have a bad day when Oversight Revenue comes to visit."

Samuel crossed his arms. "You sound sensible. Gordon may have misunderstood. Talk to me."

Evan pulled out his handscreen, thumbed up a file, and handed it over. The screen showed a research paper with the title *Diversification of Life-options and Enhancement of Revenue Base, with Power-shifting to Free-market Organizations*, by Kino Gustav.

"I've read this," Samuel said. "Oversight would never let it happen."

Evan smiled. "With a big enough lever, you can move the world."

"And that means?"

Never do the reveal too quick, Evan thought. *It falls flat, no matter how eager the audience.*

"Do you want your children to live under Oversight?" Evan asked.

"Oversight is safety –"

"Until it gets bad data from 411," Evan said.

Samuel's brow drew down in rage. His hands clenched on his golf-club. Unlike Gordon, Samuel kept up on recent events. And he had girls about that age.

"And what happens when they decide to change the accounting rules again?" Evan said.

"IGT has no discrepancies –"

"What if they want details of the Boeing merger?"

Samuel said nothing.

"It's time to change," Evan said, softly.

Samuel swallowed. "Convince me."

Evan took his handscreen back and switched it to another video. It showed a young man, working in what looked like a third-world lab. He had close-cropped black hair and Asiatic features.

Samuel watched it and shrugged. "What is this?"

"You heard about the NEXEN Bio team going to Mars."

"So?"

"Do you know the team profiles?"

"No."

Evan switched to employee badge photos. He stopped it on the image of a white-haired Asian man. The name underneath read:

DR HENRY CHANG.

"So?"

"This is Dr Chang when he worked for NEXEN," Evan said, showing the badge photo. "And this is Dr Chang today on Mars," he added, showing the video of the young man.

Samuel leaned close to the screen. He licked his lips, as if hungry. "How old is he?"

"Seventy-one."

"Is this real?"

"I can verify it any way you want it verified."

"How did you get it?"

"I have it on Mars," Evan said.

Samuel watched the clip through, twice more. Evan smiled, thinking, *A large lever. Big enough to move the world.*

ARRIVAL » Jason Fraser yelled and grabbed his seat as the Mars Rockport shuttle gave a violent lurch.

"No worries, just a little atmō," the pilot said, sparing a quick glance back at his six passengers. He was a blond-haired kid who didn't look more than 18. His eyes were shrouded by an old-fashioned VR helmet that still bore scuffed Wal-Mart, Cessna, and P&G logos.

Are they still using stuff from that Winning Mars show? Jason thought. It's, what, a dozen years old?

He forced himself to breathe deeply and regularly. People had gotten to the United States from Cuba on boats made from 1955 Chevys.

"Daddy, are we going to die?" Kaila said.

"No," Jason Fraser said, trying to smile. Kaila was eight. She was bright. But that didn't mean she knew what Jason had gotten her into.

"I'll have you safe on the ground before you know it," the pilot said.

"Really?" Kaila said.

Jason squeezed her hand and nodded. "If he says so." The shuttle had no windows. Jason wished he could look out and see that they were still far, far above the red Martian plains.

Weight slowly returned as the thin scream of atmosphere on the plastic hull increased. There were a few more minor bumps, but nothing like the first impact. Kaila seemed to be calm enough. She held his hand loosely, looking up at him with her big blue eyes from time to time. Lara's eyes.

The scream of atmosphere ratcheted up a notch. Motors hummed deep within the craft, and the nose pitched down towards the ground.

"Almost there," the pilot said.

"Where?" Kaila said.

"Landing."

"I can't see."

A quick grin from the pilot. "I'd let you see, but then I couldn't." Kaila just looked at him.

There was a bang, and they were bumping along the ground. The engines spooled up and Jason was pushed forward, in his seat.

They rolled to a stop.

"Turn on your squeezesuits," the pilot said. "Put on your headers."

When everyone's lights were green, the pilot pumped the air out and opened the hatch. Thin pink sunshine lit the battered rubber floors of the shuttle.

Jason paused at the hatch, barely feeling Kaila's hand in his own. At first, Mars didn't look much different from the Arizona desert where Jason had spent his childhood. The ochre-colored runway slashed through a salmon-colored rockfield. Far off, low hills rose. But the longer Jason looked, the more alien the world seemed. The sun was dim, fighting a thin red haze. The sky itself was tinged pink with suspended dust. There wasn't a single growing thing. Nothing moved.

What have I brought Kaila to? Jason wondered.

"I'm light!" Kaila said, jumping down the steps to the dusty runway.

"Be careful!"

"I am."

Near the runway there was a big transport Wheel and a man wearing a scuffed and dirty squeezesuit. It bore the logo of the MarsBio Coop. He met Jason and Kaila halfway.

"You're the new bio geek?" he said. "With Dr Chang's group?"

"Yeah."

"OK, you're with me. I'm Will."

"Jason. My daughter, Kaila."

Jason got Kaila strapped into the Wheel. He noticed what looked like a pink concrete bunker in the distance. It sat in the middle of a debris field. Rockport. He knew most of it was underground, but it still looked like a junkyard.

Will saw the direction of his gaze. "It's not like you can drive over to the local Wal-Mart to pick up a toaster," he said.

Jason looked into the sun. They weren't going to Rockport. They were going the other way, to the ambitious new project they called Semillon Valley Farms.

"Will Mom ever come?" Kaila said, after he strapped himself in.

Jason squinted his eyes shut against sudden tears. "No," he said. What he always told her.

Kaila's eyes went wide and serious. "OK," she said, after a time.

CONSTRAINTS ▶ The 10 was a crawl, so Jere scanned his inbox on the way down to his latest interview.

There was the usual slew of crap from the geeks and the nuts, thanking him for opening the new frontier and bemoaning his relatively obscure status and offering to help. Jereists, the media called them. Jere never answered their messages.

When he got to HoloRiginal Interactive Productions, the kid behind the desk was half his age. He wore thick-rimmed glasses that seemed to flicker with reflected light. Data-specs. He looked

up at Jere and frowned. "You're the lifelogger guy," he said. "The Mars man."

"That's right," Jere said, mustering a smile.

"Why are you here?"

"For the Senior Conceptualist position you posted –"

The kid shook his head. "Oh. No. No way. I don't want our shit showing up on your lifelog."

"I can sweep for –"

"No. Out."

"Please," Jere said.

The kid's face screwed up in a frown. "Sorry, Jere. Don't have time for this."

But I opened a whole new frontier! he thought.

The kid looked up at him, shifted his eyes to the door.

Jere left. When he got home, Pamila was there. He'd forgotten she had a key. She sat on the patio, looking out over downtown Los Angeles. In the golden light of late afternoon, she was beautiful, her slim and graceful neck, full breasts pressing against the soft fabric of her blouse. Jere wanted to ask her to stay, to never leave again.

"He's still here," she said.

"Ron. His name is Ron."

She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Jere's despair switched suddenly to blinding red anger. He gripped his hands into fists and took a step towards Pamila. "He's my father!" She just looked up at him and smiled.

"He's not a piece of meat, you fucking bitch!"

Pamila's eyes flared. For a moment he thought she'd launch herself at him, a high-colored harpie with razor nails. And then they'd do it right here, on the deck, not caring about the scrapes and bruises. That's the way it always went.

He remembered again the first time he'd met her, on that long Antarctic cruise that was part of the celebration for *Winning Mars*, part just because he could do it. She'd been so fiery, so direct, so utterly wanton that he had to have her, and she knew who he was, but wasn't wowed by it, and that was a wonderful thing too, a power thing, not just one of the groupies anymore, but something meaningful, something that might be forever.

But the fire in Pamila's eyes died. She sighed and got up. Jere watched her drive away.

From the kitchen came the chime of his flatscreen.

PRESENTATION ▶ It was one of those DC nightspots, all polished dark wood and brass railings and etched glass and the chatter of pretty liquored-up aides and middle-aged governmentals making lame excuses to their wives with the video on their phones turned off.

Too many fucking ties here, Evan thought. *Too much shit that looks like it was embalmed in lacquer since the 1800s. Give me LA any day.*

Senator Feinster was a young guy with wiry black hair not yet receding, wearing a thin, translucent light-gray suit in the latest Right Coast fashion. He leaned against the ancient bar as if he owned it. "Congrats on the Interglobal CEO gig," he said.

Evan smiled and shook his head. "Has everyone heard about that already?"

"Let me see the card."

Evan dug out his new card. He made it scroll through the corporate logo and show his name and title. INTERGLOBAL TRANSPORT. EVAN MCMASTER, CEO.

"I guess you can't shill for their GLSI now, eh?"

"Why, did the FCC get new funding or something?"



ROCKPORT

Feinster laughed, but it sounded mechanical. "Same old Evan. What's on your mind?"

"Mars."

"We know about Mars."

"Do you?" Evan let himself smile.

"Oversight knows all and tells all."

"Oversight missed the 411 kids."

Feinster frowned.

"Oversight missed the Nexgen emigration to Mars, too. And how's the NIH doing these days without their own dream team?" The frown deepened, soured.

"What exactly is your score rate on keeping the most valuable members of the geek squad from fleeing the planet these days?"

"It's exceedingly hard to predict who will have the fortitude and –"

"Stop quoting your own fucking newsbites! I could walk through a goddamn room and tell you who's gonna get up and fly."

Silence.

"Admit it. If there's anything us limp-wristed Hollywood types know about, it's psych and media and encryption. Our geeks get paid more than you. A lot more."

"Which means?"

"Which means we can pick shit out of the Martian networks like this." Evan showed Feinster the clip on his handscreen.

Senator Feinster shook his head. "I don't get it."

"That's Dr Chang. From Nexgen."

Feinster looked back at the screen again, his eyes widening in surprise. "This is a mistake."

"No. It's not."

Feinster pulled out his own handscreen and mumbled instructions to it. His eyes cast back reflected light from the screen. "Chang is seventy years old."

"Seventy-one."

"I don't believe it."

"I'll give you complete tracking data, comparative video of Chang when he got to Mars, the whole lot. It's the real deal."

Feinster sighed and closed his eyes. "The Christian Senatorial League won't like this."

Evan laughed. "Ah, yes. The Godless heathens on Mars, performing satan-spawned science!"

"That isn't funny."

"Do you think it will stop them?"

"From what?"

"Bringing Mars back into the Union, of course."

Feinster closed his eyes again and rubbed his forehead with long, slim fingers. For a long time, the only sound was the roar of the bar. "Why don't you just go and take it?" Feinster said. "You're the rocket man."

"And enjoy an after hours visit from Oversight? No thanks. I know the game. You get your piece, we get ours."

"We aren't equipped to take on a big space program," Feinster said.

"Why would I be here, if it wasn't to offer help?" Evan said, smiling. "Help from Interglobal?"

Evan nodded.

"We'll have to drum up support," Feinster said.

"What about the old starving babies gag?" Evan said.

Feinster grinned. "God, that's so old."

"But it works. You start it, we'll help fund the campaign."

"I need to talk to some people."

"See that you do," Evan said.

SURPRISE » "We're using the standard hyperefficient template," Ken the plant geek said. "With a few geneswaps and inferences to compensate for the temp change. I mean, we're running 40–50°C here, not 90. Extremophile stuff's out the window, but rainforest isn't. Working pretty well all in all."

They passed a small glass window that looked out into the



crevasse that was Semillon Valley Farms. Translucent plastic was stretched over spindly frames, lit brilliantly by the reflectors that lined the edges of the crevasse. Even in the thin atmosphere, Jason could see heat shimmering above the greenhouses.

"Eventually, we'll have the whole bottom of the crevasse lined. Still need to work out the soil neutralization schema. Right now, we're essentially running hydroponics and experimenting with aggregated marsdust for root matrices."

"I'm a fauna guy," Jason said.

Ken turned in the narrow corner to grin at Jason. "Doesn't mean I can't talk shop a bit, huh? Ain't many new faces here."

"How many are you?"

"Four hundred three. You two make five."

"Out of what, five thousand on Mars now?"

A shrug. "It's not like we have a census bureau here, Jas. Not my job."

"I suppose."

Ken took them deeper into the dig. Raw rock walls gave way to polished concrete, some carved in decorative patterns. Small signs at intersections pointed the way to MESS, QUARTERS, XCERCISE, ETAINMT, BIO, IT.

"You have dry guys here?" Jason said, looking at the IT carving.

"A few. Don't know what they really do."

"Maybe advanced encryption."

"Maybe. But it's not like they have the manufacturers defoliating their fields if you don't pay the license fees."

"Is that what happened to you?" Jason said, squeezing Kaila's hand.

"I tried for a few patents. Then everything got tied up in court. So much prior art you just can't ram anything through anymore. Fuckers."

He looked down at Kaila. "Oh, shit, sorry."

Kaila giggled. Jason waved a hand. They passed a trio of women in dirty white lab coats, coming down the bio corridor. They smiled at Jason and Kaila as they passed.

Ken looked back at Jason with a good-natured smile. "What's your story, Jas?"

"He doesn't like that," Kaila said.

"What?"

"Being called Jas."

"Oh. Sorry. So what's your story, Mr Jason?"

"Can't work with stem cells, can't alter the human genome, can't work with standard animal templates, can't do plant-animal hybrids, can't do a damn thing without Oversight's World Standards for Genetic Research biting me. Even if you go to a thirdworld, they find you."

Ken's mild grin slipped. He looked from Jason to Kaila and back again. As if putting it together. As if thinking, *So that's where the wife is.*

"You know about Chang?" Ken said.

"What about him?"

Another one of those backwards-looking guarded looks. "You'll see. He wanted to see you before you went to your quarters."

Jason opened his mouth to ask a question, but decided against it. He followed Ken down deeper into the complex. They rounded a corner and went through a thick aluminum pressure-door into a room with floors, wall, and ceiling of polished pink-tinged concrete. Low plastic benches were sparsely populated by bio research equipment, all years or decades out of date.

A young man was bent over an optical protein crystallography analyzer. When Jason came in, he looked up. Pleasant brown eyes in a generic Asian face. Early-twenties.

Another young revolutionary, Jason thought.

"Jason!" the man said, coming forward to extend a hand. "Great to see you here. And Kaila! We're going to do wonderful things."

"Do I know you?" Jason said.

"That's Dr Chang," Ken said.

Jason looked back and forth between Ken and Chang. He didn't know what to say. The Dr Chang he knew was seventy years old.

"It's amazing what you can do," Chang said, "without someone always looking over your shoulder."

MISSIVE It had to be a fake. Had to be.

Jere watched the movie for the tenth time. Maybe the twentieth. Maybe the fiftieth.

The movie showed a young Asian guy in a primitive-looking laboratory. It segued into a stop-motion record of the same man in a transparent tank, slowly growing younger. It linked out to his ID file. It linked to half a dozen independent verification services with average accuracy ratings higher than four nines.

It had to be fake. Had to be.

The file had been sent from Evan McMaster. An overlay of his corporate letterhead appeared beside it, bearing a terse hand-scrawled note:

Here's my good deed for the day. Now I can be an asshole. ~ Evan

Jere realized with a start that the sun had gone down. His kitchen was dark and silent. The bright light of the flatscreen bathed the stainless appliances in a ghostly blue glow.

It had to be a fake.

Jere went to his resources file and had Finderz do a quick search on new Mars info. The screen lit with news about Ecuador signing the GLSI, the steep fall-off in new launches, a few crazies talking about famine, the usual speculation about what the strange crinoid-like fossils found near Rockport meant, some sad-looking geeks arrested in Pakistan for trying to launch without Oversight Global Alliance approval.

Nothing about aging. Nothing at all.

An anonymized search on the keywords 'mars' and 'aging' came up with data on Dr Henry Chang, video clips from when he was protesting the restrictions on telomeric research.

Who was now on Mars.

Who was now in the clip.

Jere paid a sum greater than his monthly mortgage to Finderz to get Evan's portable phone number. He left a message.

He left many messages.

There was no answer.

MERGER This is what it's all about, Evan thought.

Everyone in the room was bigger than him. Everyone was more powerful, in the conventional measures of power. But every one of them had come. It didn't matter how much they harrumphed and shifted impatiently in their seats, or how much they frowned and muttered to their colleagues how crazy this stunt was. They were here.

Evan watched them in ultradef depth video in his suite in the Saudi luxury hotel. He waited until the chairman of GE stood up and announced he was leaving. Evan hurried down the hall and met him at the door to the meeting-room.

"Walking out on opportunity?" Evan said.

"Walking out on insanity," the GE chairman said. Behind him, others paused in mid-ascent, craning their necks to see what was happening at the door.

"So you enjoy paying seventy billion newbux a year in taxes?"

"It's manageable."

"Plus the ever-popular blip when Oversight decides that a class action really has merit? But hey, those are only every couple of years, right?"

GE blinked. Evan gave him his most corporate and dazzling smile.

GE cleared his throat and went back to his seat in the opulent meeting-room.

Evan took the head of the table. "You all know why I'm here," he said.

Murmurs.

"Because our chairman still thinks I'm crazy. And if this doesn't work, I take the fall."

More murmurs, this time with nods. Evan felt an almost electric thrill course through his body. The CEOs and chairmen of Wal-Mart and McDonald's and GE and Microsoft and General Motors and Dell were listening to him. Agreeing.

"But he wouldn't have let me come if he didn't think the idea had some merit. And if someone can make crazy ideas work, it's me."

Nods. *Winning Mars* was whispered more than once.

"We have a window of opportunity. The United States is weak, as it has been for the last couple of decades. The current account deficit is running at almost double-digit percentages of the GNP since the Second Twelve Days. And we've all felt it. Who didn't lose a fortune when the New Dollar was pegged?"

Grumbles.

"And the newbuck is in freefall already. Do you want to lose another fortune when the newnewbuck comes out? Or have more estate confiscation?"

Grumbles, louder.

Fucking Bill Gates's clone is nodding at you, Evan thought. They want to get pissed. It's what they talk about over cocktails, while they scope the waitresses and bitch about how much their new 166-foot yacht cost. Or how much they spent to acquire that hundred-thousand-square-mile parcel on Mars.

"What's surprising is China," Evan said. "China has overspent too. Look at the yuan: it's trading at 10.2 to the new dollar today, an all-time low. But China has a much better chance of recovering in the next five to ten years. They don't have the debt burden or the cyclical liabilities. Nor do they already have retirees starving because their dollars are collapsed. Our window of opportunity will close."

The audience stared, rapt, poker-faces of polite attention.

New charts appeared on the wallscreen behind him, comparing government tax revenue to customer lifetime value. "You've all run the numbers. You've done everything you can to maximize the value of your customers. Loyalty programs. Confusing points games and viral promos. Insidious growth engines. Hidden spreaders. Addicted swarms. But the real fact is, the globe's getting developed, the birthrate is slowing. What's going to happen when your shareholders find out you can't maintain that fantasy 5% growth every year, forever?"

A muted muttering. Some of the big guys were already dealing with freefalling stocks.

"The opportunity is here: shifting the tax base. There's no easier money than money you get at the point of a sword. No games, no points, no discounts. And tax revenues have historically swamped customer lifetime value."

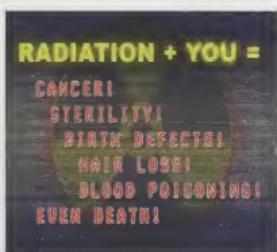
"Even when divided among a number of companies?" Wal-Mart said.

"It's incremental to customer lifetime value."

More murmuring. Evan could see them running the figures through the little spreadsheets in their heads, deciding what an immediate bump in revenue was worth.

"It's a radical plan," GE said.

"Not really. We're simply rebalancing our existing reciprocal relationship with government, based on a position of power. Governments have been taking too large a slice of customer



revenue since the turn of the century. And I could make a case that a well-funded government is a danger to itself and its citizens. In the case of the United States, it encourages meddling in other countries' affairs, which has been detrimental to our safety and economy. If we take most of the revenue, the governments will be less inclined to be dangerous. Our bottom lines will increase, and we'll be able to serve our customers better."

More murmuring, this time swelling into what almost sounded like impassioned debate. But it was not disbelief. In the hum of voices, there was something that might have been hope.

ALARM "Will it taste like bacon?" Kaila said.

Jason's mouth watered. It had been months since he'd tasted anything like meat. He supposed somewhere on Mars there were pigs, and someone crazy enough to smoke them, but they hadn't yet established trade with Semillon Valley Farms.

"I wish," Jason said, looking up from the nanomanipulator's virtbox. In front of him was a small tray of treated Martian dirt. Three greenish, egg-shaped growths studded its surface, their edges brown and dry. Another failure.

"Or sausage," Kaila said.

"I'll take chicken," Jason said. He hadn't yet been brave enough to try to cook the meatplants.

Kaila made a face. "If you're gonna make them, make them right," she said.

"I don't think we can support a sodium concentration that high."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it probably won't taste like bacon."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't, honey."

"My dad's a dummy," Kaila said, giggling.

"I don't know about that," a new voice said. Both Jason and Kaila looked up as Dr Chang entered the room.

"I think your father is quite brilliant," Chang said, sneaking a look at the nanomanipulator. "Though I don't know if we're going to be able to get past the limitations of the Martian atmosphere."

"We don't have air!" Kaila said.

Both Jason and Chang looked at her, smiling. Kaila seemed to be doing well merging in with the dozen or so kids who lived in Semillon Valley Farms.

"Eventually, we'll fatten the atmosphere," Chang said. "But right now, we work with what we have."

Chang talked with Jason about the reasons for the latest meat-plant failures. Jason wanted to give him good news, but they kept coming back to the same roadblock: desiccation and impaired growth-rate due to extreme environment, eventually leading to death.

Chang poked at the little egg-shaped pods. "Maybe we should cook them," he said.

"I haven't optimized for taste," Jason said.

"You miss meat, too," Kaila said.

"I miss a lot of things, Kaila," Chang said. Jason remembered that Chang had celebrated his forty-third anniversary with his wife shortly before he left Earth. Shortly before she died.

What is it like to be young again, and have everything to look forward to? Jason wondered. He was only thirty-three. He'd seen some attractive women, but there was always Kaila, or work, or Chang, or memories of Lara come to haunt.

Eventually, they talked enough shop that Kaila realized her father wasn't going to pay any attention to her and left. Jason waved at her as she called her goodbye from the hall.

"Good," Chang said. "Now we can talk."

"Are you OK?" Jason said. Chang had been fighting some aftereffects of the rejuvenation process for the last few months – dehydration, nausea, dizziness – but it seemed to be getting better over the last weeks.

"I'm fine. I just have to show you something."

"What?"

Chang logged into one of the ancient flatscreens that lined the walls of the lab. He brought a media clip file to the forefront and activated it. It showed the background of a cheap home studio and bore the logo SCANDALZ & GOSSP. A thin woman ranted about overlay pictures of dead babies with thin limbs and distended bellies: "They're hiding it! The Save Mars Foundation's hiding the worst of the pix! Look at these things! Horrible! No other word for

it! They're dumping the babies! Dumping them! I don't know if you know, but Mars doesn't have any air. Nothing to breathe..."

"Thin," Chang said, softly.

"So if they were alive when they were thrown out, they didn't live for long. Like garbage. Worse than Save Mars'll show you. Remember you saw it here first on Scandalz and Gossy. Message in and let's build an infowarm!"

Chang clicked the pause icon and the picture froze on the woman's thin, hectic face, mouth open and arm raised, in front of a field of dead babies.

"Did one of the settlements have a famine - " Jason began.

"No!" Chang said. "We wouldn't let that happen."

"Someone we don't know about?"

"Fakes."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" Chang said, spreading his arms.

"They know about you?"

"I can't think of any other reason they'd want to whip people into a frenzy."

"How'd they find out?"

"Oh, I doubt if our network is as secure as we want to think. It's a slow connection to Earth, but that doesn't mean it's safe."

"I don't believe it."

"Eternal life, Jason. Or at least they think it is. I couldn't tell you how many times this trick will actually work. I wouldn't lay money on it working again. But is that what you're going to tell them when they show up with guns and bureaucrats? It's not really life eternal, it's only maybe double your lifespan."

Jason was silent for a time, trying to think of something to say. "What about people on Earth? Aren't there people with family back there, people who can say that this is all made up?"

Chang shook his head. "I'm sure. But who are you going to believe? Them, or the government and a hundred-million-dollar swarm campaign?"

"There's got to be a way!"

Chang shook his head. "One way or another, they're coming," he said. "They're going to save us from ourselves, whether we like it or not."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know," Chang said. "Maybe it would just be easier to give them the research."

"Give it to them?"

"I never intended to hand it over myself."

"You'd let USG Oversight decide who gets to live forever?" Jason said, clenching his fists.

"I really doubt it's forever," Chang said.

DECISION Ron was having a good day, so Jere took him out to the Santa Monica Pier. He paid the extra money to drive the little Cadillac onto the rotting wood and park way out by the sea.

They watched the gulls beg. A mom and her daughter were throwing french fries at them.

"Goddamn scavengers," Ron said, watching the gulls catch the fries. "Should chuck some Alka-Seltzer at them while they're at it. Good riddance."

"You're sounding chipper."

"See how you feel with a red-hot jackhammer going in your guts."

"I thought you felt good."

Ron looked out over the ocean, squinting. "It's too cold."

"I thought you liked the ocean."

"I like the desert better."

The desert. He remembered the sordid commercials for Save Mars Foundation. *There's something out there*, Jere thought, or *they wouldn't be flogging it so hard*.

The lifelogger had been quiet for a while, which either meant the ghostbusters had done their job, or it was just in some kind of weird silicon fugue. Jere didn't know which. He hoped it was still incommunicado.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Could you live on Mars?"

"I can't live anywhere much longer."

"Seriously."

Ron was silent for a long time, looking out into the sea-breeze. The gulls had finished with the kid's fries and had moved on to a pair of teenage girls with popcorn.

"You know about *Winning Mars*, then."

"What do you mean?"

A look. "How I made it happen."

"What?"

Another look, longer. "God, do I have an idiot for a child? I thought it was obvious. I sent Evan to you. And for that I apologize. But I don't apologize for anything else."

"What else?"

"Giving you the money. Making shit happen. Even financing those wackos down in Mexico."

"You financed the *Mayflower*?"

A nod.

"Why?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I watched *Star Trek* a bit too much as a kid. Maybe I really liked *Star Wars*. I really couldn't tell you." Silence for a time. Then: "You wouldn't understand. I played back your convos with Evan. You didn't know shit about the space program. Not a damn thing. So when I told you that I thought we'd be on Mars in the '80s, it doesn't mean anything. Nothing. Nothing at all."

Jere was speechless. He didn't know what to say. He opened his mouth and closed it once again, but no words came out. *You killed my career*, he wanted to say. *I love you, Dad*, he wanted to say.

"Can you live on Mars?" he said, after a time.

"I'd never make it."

"What if you could?"

A long, hard look from Ron. His expression was as clear as if he had spoken. *So it's your turn to lead me into something I don't understand*, it said.

Ron turned away from the sea. "Take me home," he said.

That night, Jere sat looking out over LA's sea of lights, wondering how he could get out of the country without a travel permit. Wondering what he was thinking.

Remembering the Jereists. The ones who offered to help, any way they could.

He sent a message to the network, not even bothering to encrypt it. It didn't matter. If Oversight came for him, they came for him. It was OK. It read:

To all my Jereists,

When one has opened another world, how does

one close the door on the other?

~ Jere Gutierrez, *Seeking Mars*



OVERSIGHT They came for Evan as the sun was dawning grey over some dive hotel overlooking Chicago's Rush Street. It was fashionable again, after all these years, and convenient to Interglobal Transport's headquarters. Evan hated the city. Hated the cold. Hated the damp lake breezes. Hated the decaying canyons of skyscrapers, pierced by noisy, rattly mass transit, home to the dregs that had lost their homes in the last money crash, huddled together in great masses for warmth.

Only the rattle of a key in the lock announced their presence. But when they stepped into the room, wearing their cheap Kmart black suits and sunglasses, Evan knew. Oversight.

The girls stirred, looked muzzily up, and screamed. They flung themselves out of bed, two badly-animated living sculptures in pale flesh, and pressed themselves up against the wall, screaming for the men to get out.

The Oversight agents didn't look at either of them. Their heads never wavered from Evan. "Evan McMaster?" one of them asked. His little gold holo-pin was prismatically bright in the gloomy room.

"Shut up!" Evan said, to the girls. They went silent, as if he'd pressed a mute button.

"Are you Evan McMaster?" the Oversight agent asked again.

"Yes." No use denying it.

"Please come with us."

"For what?"

"Please come with us."

"Let me ring my lawyer," Evan said.

The Oversight guys shared a quick glance and a thin grin. One of them reached into his jacket, revealing a shoulder holster.

"OK, OK, bad joke," Evan said, putting up his hands.

The agents relaxed. "Please don't joke," the talkative one said.

"OK."

"Please come with us."

Evan nodded and went. One went ahead, the other fell in behind. They marched him through the crying halls of the shitty hotel and down to their anonymous little car.

They were unfailingly polite. Evan had to give them that. They never touched him. Every phrase was prefaced by 'please'. They even tried to smile from time to time. But they didn't answer any questions.

They took him to a gray concrete block of a building, in a decaying industrial area halfway out to O'Hare. A slightly larger version of the Oversight all-seeing eye on one featureless wall was its only decoration.

What do they know? Evan wondered. Was it possible some flyeyes had made it past their sweeps? Or did some fucking geek with too much time on his hands piece together the distributed rendering?

Evan felt a single bead of sweat trickle down his temple. He resisted the urge to wipe it away.

They took him to a room with a very ordinary-looking chair in it. Gray tweed. Square-styled, like something out of a mid-century modern antique shop. They told him to sit. Evan did.

Evan felt a sharp stab in his buttock, yelped, and started to rise. Strong hands forced him down into the seat.

"Bad spring," one of them said. "Sorry, Mr McMaster. It gets everyone."

Yeah, right, bad spring, Evan thought. What kind of drugs would they use here? The same thing they used in test screenings? Would they also have the same brainscanning tech that Hollywood used? Or better?

Evan's guts twisted. He hugged himself and closed his eyes. He hadn't been afraid in a long, long time.

How do I get out of this? he wondered. Hollywood bragged that its test audiences kept no secrets.

The agents made him wait in the chair for almost an hour. Whatever they had given him was subtle. Evan saw strange colors around the edges of the cheap fluorescent lights, but that was all.

Eventually, the door swung open and a gray-haired man wearing a casual plaid suit entered. He stopped in front of Evan and nodded at the agents. They stepped away from him and left the room.

"I'm Dr Gomez," the gray-haired man said, smiling broadly. "I trust they treated you well?"

"Yes," Evan said. *Can you tell me why I'm here?* he thought, but he said nothing.

"That's good."

Why am I here? Evan tried to say. Nothing came out.

"You are CEO of Interglobal Transport?"

"Yes."

"You are engaged in a contract with the United States government for transportation for Operation Martian Freedom?"

"We are," Evan said.

"Your company has been red-flagged because the cost of the overall contract is a significant percentage of our deficit, which has been deemed destabilizing to our national security."

Evan opened his mouth. Nothing came out. *I'm in a fucking contract with the goddamn government!* he tried to say. *They're the ones who wanted to spend the money!*

Dr Gomez waited for a while, then whispered something into a little throatmike.

"You should be able to talk more freely now," Dr Gomez said.

"I... I don't understand... we didn't set costs, we won a fixed bid."

Dr Gomez fished out a handscreen and looked at it. "Nevertheless, this has been flagged by Oversight."

"Then maybe Oversight should talk to the Senate!" Evan said. He felt hot blood rush to his face, quick on the heels of an almost overwhelming wave of relief. This was complete bullshit.

"Perhaps it is something in your own activity records," Dr Gomez said. "Aha. Here. You spend much time out of the country?"

"Of course! We have multiple business units, all out of country."

Dr Gomez whispered into his throatmike. Evan felt suddenly as if his thoughts had become quiet and distant. He tried to yell. He couldn't open his mouth.

"Is it true you have legitimate business out of the country?"

"Yes."

"And this business is related to IGT?"

"Yes."

"And this business does not compromise the interests of the United States?"

No, Evan thought. No, no, no. He said nothing.

Dr Gomez waited, then whispered more instructions.

Evan felt his thoughts flow more freely. *Always admit to a lesser offense*, Evan thought.

"Why can't you answer the last question?" Dr Gomez said.

"I don't know," Evan said.

A glance at the handscreen. "Are you compromising United States interests?"

"No," Evan said. "Yes. Maybe. We've negotiated some fuel deals that were outside Oversight Revenue tax code."

Another whisper.

"Is this true?"

"Yes."

A nod. "And is this..."

Gomez's handscreen shrilled. He looked at the screen, paled, and scurried over to the corner of the room and spoke in low tones into the thing, darting glances at Evan.

Gomez nodded frantically and hurried back to Evan. He whispered and Evan's thoughts flew free.

"Senator Feinster is here," Gomez said. "He wants to see you."

Evan tried to rise from the seat, but found that he couldn't. *What a surprise*, he thought, thinking about the incredible convenience of Feinster being in the area.

Feinster strolled in. "Sorry about the mix-up. I heard about it right after they did the pick-up. Rushed over here."

"Mix-up!" Evan said.

"Can he get out of the chair yet?" Feinster asked Gomez.

A head-shake. "Not for about thirty minutes or so."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Feinster said. "Oversight is sometimes a little overzealous. I think it's nervous."

"Oversight is not an artificial intelligence," Dr Gomez said. Feinster looked at him until he looked away.

"Fuck of a mistake!" Evan said, feeling the fear uncoil in him, feeling it morph into anger. "Bringing in your own goddamn contractors! I should fucking sue you for everything you're worth!"

"Sue who?" Feinster said.

"You!" Evan said. "The government!"

Feinster frowned and shook his head. He leaned close to Evan. "Look, this whole thing is very expensive," he said. "It's having real effects now, and it's gonna have more when the real numbers hit the books."

"So sell the product when we get it back," Evan said.

Feinster's frown deepened, but he said nothing.

"A billion and a half Chinese all want what we do."

"Don't even talk about that," Feinster said.

"License it to us," Evan said.

"Stop talking," Feinster said.

And this is how it goes, Evan thought. *Fuckers. Probably planned this whole thing.*

"What do you need me to do?" Evan asked.

"Support," Feinster said. "People are bitching about inflation. You're the swing master. Unbitch them."

"I can talk to my swarm, but I can't keep them going forever."

"We don't need forever."

"I'll lose my swing."

"So?" Feinster said.

"So I'll need something in return."

"You'll be taken care of?"

Evan nodded. "I'll swing for you."

Feinster nodded. "Good. I'm glad to see that we're still partners. We won't forget your true importance."

Evan nodded. Thinking. *By the time this is over, there'll be things you won't fucking forget. Not for a long, long time.*

SWING » "Nobody remembers me," Kaila said, moping over her oatmeal-esque breakfast in the mess. Her eyes were puffy and red. She'd tossed and turned all last night, and Jason had laid awake, listening to her.

"Maybe they didn't get the messages," Jason said. "We don't have a very good connection with Earth."

Kaila nodded and frowned down at her food, pushing it around the aluminum plate with her spoon.

"I'm sorry, Kaila." In truth, he shouldn't have let her send any messages to their old family friends back in Detroit. But when she heard about the starving babies, she wanted to do her part to set Earth right. So she'd sent letters to Kate and Matthew and Daisy and Pira, telling them that nobody was starving here, everyone was fine, but there wasn't any bacon or sausage.

There were no replies.

Because of Oversight, Jason thought. *Because they're scared. They don't want to have a record of talking to anyone on Mars.*

Or maybe because they believed. Maybe because there were so many stories on so much media from so many indepdundits and impersoners that it didn't take any effort to believe that there were

hundreds or thousands of babies dying on Mars everyday. It took effort not to believe, when billions of dollars of media were telling you different.

The only hope of convincing them would be shooting video of Dr Chang and sending it to Earth with an explanation of who he was, and a big headline that said THIS IS THE REAL REASON YOU'RE SEEING STARVING BABIES. And even then it might just vanish into the mediasphere, propagating only on a few crank sites where everything was considered BS. *And if you did that, they'd still come,* Jason thought. *Faster, and more well-armed.*

He still needed to talk to Chang about going to a deeper settlement. Mars was big. They could hide. Which might be better than the alternative.

Kaila was still playing with her food. She had eaten less than half of her breakfast.

"Want to go outside today?" Jason said.

"Can we?" she said, grinning.

"Sure."

He could take a day off. If only to see her smile.

ESCAPE Frank Sellers met Jere and Ron in a shitty little park in Oceanside. He drove a dented Ford truck from the turn of the century that wore Mexican license plates that shivered to the erratic beat of its ancient engine.

"I would have never guessed you're a Jereist," Jere said.

"I'm not," Frank Sellers said.

"Why, then?"

A shrug. "Winning Mars. You believed in me then."

"Bullshit."

"A lot of my friends admire you. There was a statue of you at the last ComicCon."

"Yeah, that and seventeen newbux'll get you a cup of Starbucks. Why?"

Frank sighed and dropped the tailgate of the truck. He did a few tricks and popped up a couple of panels, revealing two human-sized spaces beneath the bed.

"Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," Jere said.



OVERSIGHT

Frank shook his head. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that you care."

"Spill, you John Glenn fuck!"

A laugh. "Now, that sounds more like Jere."

"Tell him," Ron said.

Frank looked at the old man for a long time, then looked away. "Your dad," he said. "Financed Sellers Spaceways. I owe you."

"I never did anything for you," Jere said.

"Yes you did," Frank said, looking up at the night sky. High clouds had come in from the ocean, obscuring most of the stars, but here and there was a pinprick of light.

You did something no government has ever done, Ron's words came back to Jere.

And in that moment, Jere felt strange. Like he was being filled up with something lighter than air. Like he might drift up to the sky himself. His eyes went swimmy with tears. Suddenly the statues and the Jerests and Ron and *Winning Mars* and Frank Sellers didn't seem funny at all. They seemed like the most important things in the world.

I've done something important, Jere thought.

"IGT is buying up all the independents," Frank said. "I had a pen in my hand, ready to sign, when your message came in." Frank's eyes were wet, too. "I looked out the window at the runway. No ship on it. Of course. Hadn't launched in the last six months, thanks to the GLSI and Oversight Global Alliance. Just a big empty runway. And I thought, there's nothing I need here."

Jere didn't know what to say. The three stood there in the chill ocean breeze until Frank spoke again.

"Everybody in," Frank said. "Next stop, Mexico."

Jere and Ron crawled into the little metal bins under the truck-bed, and waited while Frank fastened the covers in place.

Just like we used to get into this country, years and years ago, Jere thought. *Oh, the irony.*

PROJECTIONS › The next meeting they held on the RussSpace Princess Hotel Resort, just because they could. Evan hated it. Being crushed by the acceleration on the way up was fine. Seeing the world disappear beneath him on the wallscreens was fine, too. Even hearing the hotel guests complain about the price of Interglobals' launches was fine, because that was money they were putting on their bottom line.

But the damn weightlessness! It was the first time Evan had ever used an airsickness bag.

Next meeting'll be on Earth, Evan thought. He was a land-guy. That's the way he was. The whole space idea was stupid.

The McDonald's chairman had brought his own security staff. Evan wasn't surprised when they politely drew him aside and said, "You're bugged, Mr McMaster."

"I know," Evan said. Fucking Oversight. He was spending 30% of his realtime-render budget on spoofing the damn bug in his ass. But he couldn't take it out. Oh, no. Not unless he wanted to stay up here on this fucked-up hotel, in its horrible too-light corkscrew gravity.

"We're concerned –" the security guy said.

"I'm not," Evan said. He shot them a link of the realtime feed and explained the spoofing. They backed off.

The meeting room was sparse and smelled faintly of beer and plastic. But most of one wall had been pierced by small round portholes, and the full Earth turned beneath them.

The attendance was sparse, too. The serious ones. The ones who

felt the hand of Oversight and the EU on their throats. Wal-Mart. McDonald's. P&G. Microsoft.

The Wal-Mart chairman spoke first. "So tell us about your Oversight visit," he said. "Should we be concerned?"

"No."

Wal-Mart turned to look at the others. "Does this reassure any one of you?"

Murmurs and small head-shakes.

"He's bugged," McDonald's said.

"And spoofing it," Evan said. "It's under control."

"I'm even less reassured," Wal-Mart said. "I think we need to call a vote of confidence."

Oh you fucking fuckheads, Evan thought.

"Seconded," McDonald's said.

"All in favor of a vote of confidence, say aye."

There was a chorus of ayes.

"Well, it looks like we don't even have to call the nays," Wal-Mart said.

Yes, and you'd dearly love to replace me, wouldn't you, you asshole? Because you know where this is going. And you want to be on top. May I say something before the vote?"

"Of course."

"Thank you," Evan said. "Here's why you need to vote for me. I'm the only one who can pull this through."

Murmurs. Evan waited until they died and Wal-Mart said, "Explain."

Evan allowed himself to smile. It was a broad, ugly smile. "I'm glad you asked. Do you have realtime stats available on your sales?"

"Of course," Wal-Mart said.

"Good. Watch them for the next minute."

Evan subvocalized into the throatmic, silently congratulating himself for having the foresight to have it installed after the Oversight pickup. He smiled at Wal-Mart and waited, while the others in the room fidgeted nervously.

Wal-Mart made a show of turning on his data-specs. He sat back in his shiny plastic seat and crossed his arms.

After about thirty seconds, he sat up straight in his chair. "What are you doing?"

Evan allowed his grin to get a little wider.

"What the hell are you doing?" Wal-Mart's eyes glinted with reflected data. Evan could see the graphs being plotted in front of his eyes. Wal-Mart stood up. "Stop it!"

Evan just smiled. The McDonald's security guys started to move. A head-shake from McDonald's stopped them.

"Good move," Evan said. "You know what a deadman switch is. You don't want to see what happens when I let go of mine."

"What are you fucking doing?" Wal-Mart screamed.

Evan wagged a finger. "Tsk, tsk. If only middle America could hear you now."

"Tell me!"

"Just a little rumor," Evan said. "About certain online purchases at Wal-Mart having a higher risk factor associated with them. Might get a visit from the guys wearing cheap suits and gold pins. Just a tiny little rumor, spreading amongst my swarm."

"Stop it!" Wal-Mart said.

"Of course," Evan said. "All you have to do is ask." He subvocalized a second instruction. After only seconds, Wal-Mart visibly relaxed.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Just a few well-placed refutes, from different members of the

same swarm. Higher reliability ratings."

"But how'd it happen so fast?"

"You don't actually shop, do you?"

"No. That's what Assistants are for..." A look of slow horror crept over Wal-Mart's face.

"There. You see. Everyones uses them. You'd be surprised how many have Oversight-sensitive sniffers."

Silence from Wal-Mart, and the rest of the room.

"I'm not here to hold you over a barrel," Evan said, standing and walking among them. "I just needed to demonstrate the power of an addicted swarm. I have the media swing. You don't. Yeah, I know you all have ghostblogs and fake lifeloggers and stuff like that, all scripted by high-priced opinion-manipulators, but remember this. Your manipulators are the ories we rejected. They couldn't make it in Hollywood. So they work for you. And cheap off-the-shelf inference software doesn't compete with deep brainscanning. I know what people want. That's why Oversight dragged me in. Dragged *me* in. Not you. Because you don't matter enough. Because they know something is going on. And they're afraid that I can make it work."

Silence and frightened looks.

"I don't want any part of this," McDonald's said, standing up.

"We're all in this together," Evan said.

"You have nothing but my signature on paper. Nothing electronic. Sorry, Mr McMaster, you can take this one on yourself." McDonald's turned and made to leave.

"I'm sure you wouldn't want complete video of all our meetings released on my swarm," Evan said, softly.

McDonald's stopped walking.



"I heard that plotting to take over the world doesn't do much for your per-franchise sales."

McDonald's turned around. "So that's your threat."

Evan shook his head. "Not a threat. Not at all. I just want us all to be clear. We will see it through. And I'm the one who can make it work."

McDonald's sighed and returned to his seat.

Evan spent the rest of the time going over the exchange rates for their interlocking corporate currencies, schedules for distribution, and when to time the reveal that they could be used like real money.

And other documents that only existed on paper. The basic Corporate Constitution and the freedom to choose. Terms of service for basic indenture. Contract for end-of-service-life pensions. Some diagrams of the interrelationship between producer, franchise, and consumer, powered by the endless rat-wheel of people trying to get ahead.

Contingencies, really. Things to run under the President's nose when he wanted to bargain. Things that they needed, if it was to go smoothly in the end.

And finally, when everyone was exhausted and interested only in going to the Earthview Bar and picking over the most attractive barkeeps, Evan revealed one last thing.

"This is only conceptual," he told them. "It can be changed. But I've taken the liberty of having a name, logo and tagline drawn up for our combined corporate entity."

He killed the lights the rest of the way and lit the wallscreen. It showed a stylized infinity symbol, laid on its side. The bottom half was emphasized to suggest a 'w'. Underneath it, in simple type, it read WINFINITY: FOR LIFE.

"The tagline's a bit of a play on words," Evan said, cutting through the silence. "But I'm sure we all get it."

For a long time, nobody said anything. Nobody moved. From the silence, nobody even breathed.

Evan smiled, thinking, *You know it's real when it has a logo.*

LAUNCH Jason and Kaila and Dr Chang and a half-dozen other members of the Semillon Valley Farms bio lab watched the jittery feed from Earth. Most everyone was in the ETAINMT room, watching on the big wallscreen. But somehow it seemed better to watch this in the lab, on an ancient and dented flatscreen where the phosphors had started to go dim at the edges.

The point of view cut from USG Oversight's new launch facilities in Florida, to Interglobal Transport's pads in India and Africa and Ecuador. All were flying the new American flag, the one with thirteen stars arranged into Oversight's all-seeing eye.

In front of the Florida launch facility, a crowd had gathered, like something out of the old moonshots. This crowd carried banners that read *SAVE MARS! AND NO MORE DEATH, NO MORE LIES!* and *TREASURE THE BABES!* Many of them waved little American flags of their own.

The commentator droned on favorably about the success of USG Oversight and Interglobal Transport's joint venture. Links to the details of the launch were prominent on-screen. Smaller links to commentary involving the devaluation of the new dollar and the starving crowds in Atlanta and Dallas and Phoenix were buried.

Jason felt a momentary flare of anger. He could imagine the words from the White House. *Let's all stay together in this difficult time. We must make our own sacrifices in this important endeavor. What we give up is a small price to pay for saving an entire world.*

What we give up. Images of Lara, lying crumpled on the verge of the forest in Ecuador. They hadn't even tried to cover up what they'd done to her.

Jason imagined what President Greene might say to him. *A few bad apples in every bushel. Can't predict the outcome of complex situations.*

"Daddy, you're hurting me," Kaila said.

Jason looked down. He held Kaila's hand in a crushing grip. He let go abruptly, taking his hand away from hers.

"It's OK. You can hold my hand."

Jason gave Kaila his hand again, holding hers lightly. He looked up, at the screen, so she wouldn't see his tears.

Brilliant flares lit the Florida launch pads. A low rumble built. The first of the Operation Martian Freedom ships rocketed down the runway and towards the sky.

Symbolic, Jason knew. Most of the operation would likely be launched from orbit. But symbolism was important. The crowd cheered and waved its eye-flags frantically.

The entire room was silent, except for the drone of the commentator, talking about the five-month journey to Mars, and a couple of white mice, scratching in a cage.

They watched the other launches: Africa, Ecuador, India.

When it was all over, Jason thought: *Meet the new world. Same as the old world.*

"We have to leave," Jason told Dr Chang.

Chang said nothing.

"There are places we can go. The south polar stations."

"They'll find us," Chang said.

"We'll do our own trek, found a new station."

Chang looked at Kaila.

Jason shook his head. "We have to!"

Chang sighed. "We have time."

Kaila looked from Jason to Chang, her mouth open, her eyes wide in confusion. "Why would anyone want to be young?" she asked.

Chang smiled softly and ruffled her hair.

"I mean, you're still old, Dr Chang," Kaila said.

Chang chuckled, which prompted nervous titters from the room. "I suppose I am."

"Kaila," Jason said.

"It's all right," Chang said. "Let's get back to work."

FAITH Jere looked out at the stars from the tiny porthole in Ron's cabin. Ron was strapped lightly to the bed, a tiny bunk that wasn't much wider than a bench. Ron grumbled and wheezed in his sleep.

But at least he was grumbling and wheezing. During launch, Ron's eyes had rolled up in his head and he had stopped breathing for long seconds. Jere had waited, tears falling hard in the brutal acceleration, unable to stand, unable to do anything.

But then there was the sensation of falling, falling, and the tiny porthole showed only black sky and stars. Ron made a rude hiccupping noise and tried to sit up. He coughed and pulled at the straps that held him in. And then Jere was laughing, laughing in relief, and Frank was there, and everything was OK. Because they were all alive. And Oversight hadn't shot them down.

And the hand of Oversight hadn't reached to Sellers Spaceways in orbit, either. The transfer to *Mars Xpress* had been silent and without drama, other than the threats coming in over the comm.

Now, all that was left was waiting. Months of it. Ron seemed to

be doing well in zero-g, but Jere knew that sometimes there was a final rally before the darkness.

Just make it to Mars, he thought.

There was a knock on the flimsy door. "Come in," Jere said.

Frank floated in and hung over Jere like a ghost. He pointed to Ron and whispered, "How's he doing?"

"Good. Has Oversight stopped yelling at us?"

Frank grinned. "No, they're still telling us to come home and take our trials like well-behaved Nazis."

Jere nodded.

"We'll be able to wave to them pretty soon," Frank said.

"What does that mean?"

"Operation Martian Freedom. They'll pass us in a month or so. Looks like they'll be landing shortly before us."

Jere started. "Isn't that bad?"

"I don't know."

"You don't think they'll try to intercept us, do you?"

Frank laughed. "Waving at them was a figure of speech. We won't pass that close."

"What if they already hold Rockport when we arrive?"

Frank shrugged. "Then we have the shuttle take us somewhere else."

"But..." *What about Ron?*

Frank shook his head sadly.

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

In the days and weeks that followed, Ron continued to rally. Some days he seemed almost like his old self. Jere spent time wearing the Virt. He watched the extended footage of *Winning Mars*. Except for tiny snippets, he had never watched his own show. It was like watching the memories of another man.

Eventually, Its-Ur-Life found him. Using the eyes of the ship, it bled tiny fragments of choppy video back to the world. Thousands of emails bounced off the *Mars Xpress*'s commfilter. Some of the ones that made it through wished him luck. Some of them came through and wished him dead. None of them knew why he was taking Ron to Mars, or none of them said.

A short document arrived, late in the trip. Divorce papers from Pamela. Signed and judged. Done deal.

Jere sighed. He felt light. As if every piece of his old life had been made of lead, and he had just shrugged them all off.

There was no turning back. And that was good.

PRESS The Times Consortium invited Evan to their yacht that floated off the shores of the Philippines. Evan ignored them until they started running stories about Jere and Ron. Then he went.

The halls of the yacht were lined with dark-stained wood and hung with ancient yellowed newspapers, embalmed in some miracle polymer. Evan stopped at one that shouted in eight-hundred-point type, WAR!

They did the now-customary swipe on Evan and told him he was bugged. He did the now-customary thing with showing them the spoofed feed.

There were a dozen of them sitting around the big conference table. A big picture-window showed blue sea and nothing else outside.

Evan didn't wait for introductions. He didn't even sit down. He pulled out a chair, leaned on the table, and told them, "Stop the stories on Jere and Ron. Now."

"Stop the lifelogger, and we'll stop the stories," the chairman

said. Evan's dataspec fed him his name: Henry Greiman. Other data scrolled, but Evan blinked it away. Henry was a young man, maybe late thirties, who wore glasses and an old-style suit.

"Can't be purged, I'm told."

"You can reach into the Martian network, but you can't have an ancient lifelogger purged?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Maybe it's achieved sentience," Evan said, grinning. "Maybe it's orchestrating this whole thing. Maybe it has taken over my brain, and I'm just a puppet."

"Don't play with me!" Henry yelled.

Evan sighed. "We can't kill it."

"Because you can't, or because you won't?"

And that is the question, isn't it? Evan thought. *You want to know the big reveal. But it's not time. Your reward is yet to come.*

"I have new images from Mars," Evan said.

"I'm not interested in that!" Henry said.

"This is what you get," Evan said.

"You think you dictate our policy."

"We've always dictated your policy."

Silence.

"If you'd like, we'll pull our sponsorship."

Silence.

"You know about my new friends. You wouldn't want them to pull their sponsorship, too?"

Henry frowned. "Your swarm is weakening."

Of course it is, Evan thought. There were only so many free things he could give away, and he'd been spending freely. Information. Bootleg interactives. Free toys.

But Evan was always surprised how cheap people could be bought. Sometimes it only took a little bit of attention or a few kind words. Something that even a chatterbot can do. It would hold together. Long enough.

"How strong is your swarm?" Evan said.

Silence.

"The lifelogger isn't going anywhere."

"But..."

"And the curtain isn't going to go up before I'm ready."

They weren't happy. They didn't want to hear it. But in the end, they shared Bombay gin and talked about the kinder, gentler past, when the newspapers and television could manipulate most anyone.

Evan showed them the new video from Mars. The new babies, the tiny shriveled things designed to live on the surface. Grasping with their little scaled fingers, glaring at the hot lights with their little slit eyes. Henry and the others watched it quietly.

"This is good," Henry said, when it was over.

Evan smiled. The mob algorithms had already told him what he needed to know. Release this, and the heartland's anger would go edged and righteous. They'd march on Washington. Parts of cities would burn. And if Operation Martian Freedom killed every single Martian, they wouldn't complain. They would bear the returning troops around on their shoulders, repeal the littering laws and revive the ticker-tape parade, make them into heroes of the virt.

"It's all bullshit, isn't it?" Henry said.

"No," Evan said. *Not at all. What you believed was real. And when the reality changed suddenly, there was opportunity. Great opportunity.*

Evan smiled, not caring what cameras might be watching. It was almost time.

RESOLVE "You've got to go," Jason said.

Chang frowned and shook his head, hunched over his late lunch. He had been working since early that morning, filling the tanks with precious water, mumbling to himself.

"When they land, it's finished. Over."

Chang said nothing.

"They'll poke you and prod you and study you."

Still nothing.

"Then they'll decide it isn't Christian to do rejuvenation, and secretly use it on themselves."

Nothing.

"Chang!"

"That's an accurate assessment, yes," the young-old man said softly.

"He's a goddamn TV producer! He doesn't matter! He doesn't deserve –"

"And you are to play God?" Chang said, standing. "You choose who lives and dies?"

It was Jason's turn to go silent. Chang was right. It was just the weeks and weeks of waiting, the ominous silence from the Oversight fleet, the new photos of the deformed things. Almost every night, Jason lay awake in his bunk, staring into the perfect pitch-darkness, wishing the images would go away. All he wanted to do was forget. To be blank and smooth and black, just like the night.

"What matters is they tried," Dr Chang said, softly. "Just like us. They tried, and I'll try, too."

"You said it might not work again."

A head-shake. "It might not."

"What happens if Operation Martian Freedom lands first?" Jere said.

"I don't know."

"You might never be able to help him."

Chang sighed. "If you want to go, go."

"I – "

"Take Kaila. There are plenty of places to hide. They might not even find you for the rest of your life."

Said that way, it sounds like I'm the world's biggest coward, Jason thought. He squeezed his eyes shut. No. It was time to stop running.

"I'll stay," he said.

INTERMISSION "He's not breathing," Jere said, as he stumbled down the steps to the salmon-colored surface of Mars.

His mind was going a mile a second, thinking, *This isn't that much different from Earth; the sun is so dim; my father is dead; this squeezesuit is going to crush me; I can't believe we made people wear them.*

"He's breathing," Frank said, looking at a small readout on the chin of Ron's helmet. "Not well, but he's breathing."

"He's going to die!"

The kid that shuttled them down came out, wearing a scuffed squeezesuit. "Still pulsing," he said, looking at the same readout. "He'll make it."

"The suit's gonna crush him!"

"Jere, he's OK. Just unconscious. Let's get him on the Wheel."

Jere looked around. "What Wheel?"

Frank and the kid looked around.

"Maybe OMF," the kid said. Operation Martian Freedom

had landed about a week ago. Video from Earth had showed them setting up their base camp, pressure-tents and guns. Then nothing. And nothing from Mars, either, though the chatter on the nets was thick with fear and anticipation.

Was it possible they'd intercepted the Wheel from Semillon? Were they stranded in Rockport? Jere bent over, feeling the fear and rage and pain course through him. They couldn't have come this far for nothing!

Jere felt Frank's hand on his back. He shrugged it off, and stood up.

"Semillon insists they're OK," Frank said. "The Wheel should be here."

"Where is it?" Jere cried.

"I don't know."

They waited beside the runway for a while. Jere kept sharp watch on Ron's vitals, but they never went off green. Eventually, the kid pilot shrugged and began trudging towards what looked like a pink concrete bunker in the middle of a vast junkyard. Frank and Jere followed, carrying Ron with them.

Just outside the entrance to the pink bunker, a rough stone statue stood. It took Jere a while to realize that it was an image of himself, reaching up as if to touch the sky. At the base, amongst a nest of obscene graffiti, the engraving read FOR JERE, WHO STARTED IT.

Jere stopped. He felt his knees grow weak. *Like fucking Washington*, he thought. The statue was in bad shape. One of his arms had been snapped off. It was gouged and pock-marked.

"Someone'll put you up for the night," the kid said. "After that, you'll have to work. Doesn't really matter who you are."

Jere nodded.

The kid unlocked the first pressure-door, but they never made it inside. Frank said, "Look," and pointed back the way they came.

A dust-trail rose over the plain. Far-off, Jere could see the glint of the weak sun on a translucent Wheel.

Frank grinned. "That's them. Just a little late."

Ten minutes later, they loaded Ron into an improbable structure made of transparent plastic and aluminum struts, while the driver, Will, apologized.

"Have you heard anything about Operation Martian Freedom?" Frank asked.

"I don't know any more than you," Will said. "They landed. They should be here."

"But..."

"We take our luck where we can get it," Will said.

Soon they were bouncing over the Martian plains. *I get to re-enact Winning Mars*, Jere thought. He looked at Ron, who stirred a bit in his harness and half-opened his eyes.

But this time, the stakes were higher than thirty million dollars.

RAGE » Evan was hiding on the Interglobal RussSpace Princess Hotel when he gave the final footage to the media, called the last of the swarm, and sat back to watch the show. USG Oversight was looking for him. They were trying to bribe a Winfinity ship to launch. But most of them were long-gone.

Too late, as usual, Evan thought.

The New York Times, like a vengeful spectre risen from the dead, was the first to publish the exposé: government documents taken from the deepest datanets, showing the real reason for Operation Martian Freedom.

It started with interviews of pale 3D producers hidden in Hollywood basements, showing wireframes of the starving babies and the fields of dead and the withered, genetically-engineered things that the Martians had supposedly created. Laughing at the credulity of everyone. Asking how modern people who used the Virt could be fooled by the faked footage.

Then it was on to the big news, the real video footage, the stuff that bore the stamp of Infomedia, Inc., a rising star in the information authentication industry. It showed the old Dr Chang, tottering off to Mars. It showed Dr Chang on Mars, looking a little happier, bouncing around in the low gravity. It showed Dr Chang in a tank, time-lapse footage showing the years melting away. Then Dr Chang springing out of the tank, looking like he was no older than twenty.

The screams from the other Winfinity execs started shortly after. Evan conferred in the biggest hotheads.

"I had to show it," Evan told them. Their images glared back at him from the slice-and-dice of the wallscreen. "Sorry. Tried the cancer cure thing on a test audience. But there aren't enough people who care. This touches everyone."

"Everyone will want it," said Wal-Mart, frowning from the upper left corner.

"Everyone wants to be rich and famous. Let them want."

There was grumbling, but what could they do? Evan smiled and watched as the media campaign built.

First, more investigative stuff, showing links between the highest levels of USG Oversight and the faked films. Establishing a clear link between the Save Mars foundation and certain senators. Evan got a glimpse of Senator Feinster running, trying to cover his face. The phantom ache in his ass felt immediately better. Now he could have someone dig out the fucking bug.

Then, Evan's own performance. Standing inside Interglobal's Indian headquarters, while serious business-suited Hindus worked quietly in the background. All completely fake, of course. But if you asked anyone who appeared in those videos if it had happened, they would say yes. If their lifelog was on, its footage would show Evan's back and the newsmedia with their macrocams and clouds of flyeyes. Evan had spent all to make this perfect.

"I feel used," Evan's ghost said. "I took those contracts in good faith. What do I get in return? A visit from Oversight, and now this."

Links appeared to an edited version of Evan's Oversight summons and interview.

"Interglobal supported Operation Martian Freedom," one of the mediacasters said.

"Of course we did," Evan said. "Everyone did. This...this changes everything."

For minutes, there was ominous silence on the global net. Like the quiet that precedes a Midwest tornado.

Then the boards lit up.

In disbelief at first. The Times was known for sensationalism, they said. They could have created the whole thing.

The protests didn't really become angry until Evan's swarm jumped in and said yes, the links are good, the images tie with Found Media, the report seems to be accurate. Across the course of the day, more and more independents and impersoners verified the authenticity of the story. Some of them made ties to Jere and Ron's flight, saying they must have known, to take that chance.

At 5:00 Eastern Standard time, the President made a short appearance on the nets to deny that this had ever occurred, that it was a fabrication, that he couldn't believe anyone would take this seriously. Beads of sweat stood on his brow on most of the transmissions.

"That's a nice touch," Wal-Mart said. "Though they'd never let it happen in real life."

"The average American IQ, as measured by a Stanford-Binet test from 1950, is 87 today," Evan said. "Do you think they'll be so analytical?"

Wal-Mart nodded.

The swarm grew and the media started asking the real questions. Where was Operation Martian Freedom? How come they hadn't heard anything about them? Was it possible that USG Oversight had concocted this whole scheme as a coverup? And, if it had, how could they trust it, after that?

There was another silence, this one longer.

After Evan's dinner, when he was enjoying a solitary glass of Opus One, the President came on again. He acknowledged that this might have happened, but he had no direct knowledge of it.

At the same time, a video had started circulating on some of the smaller communities, showing the President saying that Operation Martian Freedom was a joke, if they really knew what they had up there, then there'd be real trouble.

In other news, the White House press secretary admitted that Operation Martian Freedom had landed at the wrong location. When they tried to show footage, it was choppy and unintelligible.

At the same time, a relatively prominent investigative reporter did an exposé on how most corporate rewards were now interchangeable, and functioned almost exactly the same way as currency. International currencies fell by an average of 36% in after-hours trading.

"They see where it's going," Evan said to his screen.

"If it's so clear, shouldn't you be down here?" McDonald's said. "Soon," Evan said.

"What if they uncover our own Found Media?"

"Oh, it's already circulating."

"It is?"

Evan smiled. "Yes. On some of the smaller boards. Our swarm is making them look like soreheads, though, with ranting anti-corporate backgrounds. The skew is far in our favor."

"I thought those kinds of things were unpredictable."

Evan laughed. "Who told you that?"

"Sellers-McKinzie. Our ad agency."

"Fucking amateurs."

The net-battles raged through the night, in every country of the world. The President was burned in effigy. Crowds pressed against the White House gates, holding signs that demanded full disclosure. Pundits ranted about the meaning of the governmental press corps' inability to show the disposition of Operation Martian Freedom. Fanatics started collecting all the corporate bux they could, starting small newssfurries about how they might provide a more stable base than national currencies. And far in the background, a few voices began asking if government by corporation would really be that bad.

When those voices had strengthened, late at night in America, Evan made one more appearance, to say that Interglobal had made their own investigation, that the story was true, and demanded answers about what happened to Interglobal's ships.

In the early hours of the morning, Evan still sat in front of the screen. Sleep wasn't possible. His mind was going a thousand miles an hour. He was going to see a new world born. He could feel the tension. Something was going to happen.

Early that morning, a homemade missile, launched from the Texas-Mexico border, managed to destroy the Lincoln Memorial. Washington's antimissile defense took out several hundred people in two suburbs, widely separated. Others launched from as far away as Saudi Arabia and Korea. One more made it past the defenses, but landed safely away from the White House.

What are you seeing now, President Greene? Evan thought.

The nets exploded in a blinding wave of rage and hate. The mob swarmed over the White House gates. Quite a few died. Most didn't.

Before breakfast, the President was in hiding and the White House was in flames. Troops sent in to stop the rebellion defected. The sheer number of people in the Capitol looked like ants on a mound of sugar.

Talking heads in Europe and Asia started bemoaning the corruption of the American government. At least until Found Media of their own collusion in USG Oversight's plans were found and broadcasted over the net. Around the world, riots flared, businesses stayed closed, commerce ground to a halt.

"Now," Evan said, and summoned his shuttle.

MISTAKE They didn't look like heroes to Jason. But the day that Jere and Ron Gutierrez arrived, he saw more people in the halls of Semillon Valley Farms than he ever had.

In the media maelstrom on Earth, stories had circulated about Ron Gutierrez having financed some of the earliest independent Mars shots. Some of the people in the halls reached out to touch him as he passed. The old man's head hung limp in front of him. Jere Gutierrez and a tall, thin man that Jason recognized as the pilot from *Winning Mars* helped him stumble down the hall.

Kaila followed them into the bio lab. "Is he dead, daddy?" she said.

"Kaila!" Jason said.

But Ron Gutierrez just smiled. "Not yet," he said.

Even if we get him in the tank, Operation Martian Freedom will just come and take him, Jason thought. He didn't believe the news that they had landed at the wrong location. They were probably just waiting for the right time to strike. That was how Oversight worked. It waited, watched. And the moment you thought its eye had turned from you, the instant you thought you were safe, they came and took you away.

Jere and Jason and Frank helped get Ron into the long, low tank. A half-hour later, the hookups were in place. The transparent sides of the tank went milky-white as the first phase of treatment started.

"He's alive," Chang said. "For now."

"When will we know for sure?" Jere said.

Chang shrugged. "I don't know. Days? Weeks? As long as he's alive, we have a chance."

"And his condition?"

A head-shake. "Theoretically, this sets everything back to its initial state. This should act on the cancer cells the same way. But I wouldn't place any bets."

"How long?"

"Seven months, in my case."

Jere nodded and looked at the shadow of his dad in the tank.

"He's still old," Kaila said, looking at Dr Chang.

CAGE Jere celebrated the second day that Ron clung to life in the mess. It was the first time he'd been able to eat. The food tasted like the instant oatmeal his mom used to make when she was lazy. But it was better than staying in his tiny little room.

Media played on the ancient wallscreen in the mess. First, Operation Martian Freedom, stumbling into Rockport after hiking cross-country for days. They were terribly dehydrated and breathing stale air. Rockport's citizens took their guns away from them easily.

Then, on a better connection, the landings. Ships of many different types. They bore corporate logos, a stylized W and an infinity symbol intertwined, with discreet lettering set beneath them: WINFINITY. FOR LIFE.

Frank sat down next to Jere and looked up at the screen. He frowned and leaned closer, as if to get a better look. "Hey! I know that ship."

"What?"

"That one. It's Samson's ship. His own design. Interglobal shut him down, just like me. And hey, wait a minute, that's Jim's."

Frank stood up and went to stand by the monitor. "These are all independent ships," he said. "None of them are GT template."

"What does it mean?" Jere said.

"It means we know what Interglobal wanted the ships for."

"They say Wininfinity."

Frank shrugged. "I think that's their new name."

Later that afternoon, more footage. Rockport, ringed by the Wininfinity ships. Men and women in sleek squeezesuits, styled to look like business suits. Operation Martian Freedom's colonel, signing a surrender.

"They came to save us," Frank said.

Jere frowned. *Or at least it looks that way.*

OFFER "Who oversees Oversight?" Evan said, standing with the other CEOs in the shadow of the burned-out White House. He wore a perfect blue suit with a small gold Wininfinity pin. Just like Oversight.

"Maybe we should have asked that question long ago," Evan said. "Because, after this, it's clear there was never any real Oversight. Mistakes we thought honest may have been cover-ups of terrible dark operations, like this one. I helped the government with Operation Martian Freedom, and I myself was a victim of Oversight."

Evan eyed his dataspex display. The net reaction to that was a good, broad spike. Yes, Evan thought. *I'm a victim. Just like you.*

"I know we should be grateful that this scandal has been brought into the open. But I feel used. I want to work together with a reformed United States government to move ahead, but the candidates will have to be carefully chosen."

Nods from some of the assembled crowd.

"And that is our offer. The Wininfinity coalition of companies would be proud to work hand in hand to restore our great nation. This is our promise. We will be their Oversight, and they will be ours."

Another good spike. Everyone was looking for leadership.

And leadership they would get.

ASSISTANCE Wininfinity took their time making their way to Semillon Valley Farms. Jason watched the boards and the clips with a suspicious eye. People in Rockport said they were great,

they helped finish some of the leaky tunnels, they brought new screens and supplies and seeds and media and equipment, they were all so nice.

And they promised even more. Regular flights to Mars. More research money dedicated to spaceflight. A wishlist of equipment and supplies to be donated by corporations that wanted to make Mars a more sustainable home.

Every settlement they stopped at, they helped. They worked. They left gifts.

Bribes, Jason thought.

But he wondered. The For-Life spirit had hit Semillon Valley Farms, and most of them were eagerly awaiting Wininfinity's arrival.

But Jason could see them as nothing more than Oversight in a friendly mask. He knew what they wanted. Whether they came in and took it, or bribed it from them, did it matter?

And Chang's words kept coming back: *And you are God now, to decide who lives and dies?*

But he wished more of them could see clear. Wininfinity brought great gifts, but they also now effectively controlled transport and commerce. Maybe they were playing nice now, but that would change. Wouldn't it?

Jason didn't know. He thought back to the history books he'd read, the old ones that told the real story of the American Revolution, the ones that still had the Bill of Rights in them. And he remembered thinking, *Wow, these guys actually believed this stuff. The inherent nobility of man. The ability of the individual to make free choices.*

It took over two hundred years for it to morph into Oversight. How long would it take Wininfinity?

Jason sighed. He didn't know.

But he hoped at least some of them believed.

LIVING Jere tried to stay away from the bio lab. It was impossible. Eventually, Chang put a plastic chair out so that Jere could sit by Ron in the afternoons, after he'd done his squeezesuit time in the farms.

It was still too early to see any change in Ron, even when the support fluid cycled back to near-transparency. Jere told himself that Ron was looking younger, better. He tried to ignore Dr Chang's muttered comments and head-shakes as he studied incomprehensible graphics on his handscreen.

"He's still old," Kaila said, one day, when the support gel had cleared.

"I suppose he is."

"Kaila, don't bother him," Jason said.

"My dad is going to make plants that taste like bacon."

"Kaila! I told you I couldn't."

"I'd settle for chicken," Jere said, softly.

"Yuck," Kaila said, screwing her face up into a comical mask of disgust.

I'm on Mars, complaining about the food, Jere thought, and laughed. After a few moments, Jason joined him.

This is OK, Jere thought. *I can live here.*

Jason's rather bizarre career has taken him from the dry world of engineering to the wild halls of advertising, where his work has been read (but probably not enjoyed) by millions of people around the world. The stories people want to read have been seen in *Interzone* ('Winning Mars' in issue 196) and elsewhere, and upcoming in *Sci Fiction*. He maintains a website at www.jasonstoddard.net.

INTERMISSION

STORIES • THIRD DAY LIGHTS BY ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATED BY JESSE SPEAK



THIRD DAY LIGHTS BY

The mist was thick as clotted cream, shot through with light from the luminous maggots in the sand. And through that mist, which I knew would entrap almost any creature unlucky enough to wander through it, came my first supplicant in over thirty cycles. He rode atop one of the butterfly men's great black deer, which greeted me with a sweep of its massive antlers. His skin was as pale as the sand was black; his eyes were the clear, hard colour of chipped jade. A fine, pale fuzz covered his scalp, like the babies of humans. He had full, hard lips and high cheekbones. His nose had been broken several times, and was quite large regardless. His ears protruded slightly from his head.

He was too beautiful. I did not believe it. Oh, I had, in my travels, seen men far more attractive than he. Men who had eagerly accepted me in whatever form I chose, and had momentarily pleased me. But I had never seen this kind of beauty, that of the hard edges and chipped flakes of jade. That aura of bitterly mastered power, and unspeakable grief subdued but somehow not overcome. He gave the impression that he was a man to respect, a man who would understand my own loneliness despite my family, a man who might, perhaps, after so many cycles...

But I have not lived for so long away from my Trunk by believing in such things.

Eyes never leaving mine, he touched the neck of the deer and it knelt for him to dismount. His bare feet should have frozen solid seconds after they touched the sand, and the maggots began devouring the icy flesh, but instead he stood before my staircase, perfectly at ease. From within the hostile mist, lacy hands and mouths struggled towards him but never quite touched.

That is how I knew he wasn't human.

I anticipated with relish the moment when he would speak and allow me to drop him on the other side of the desert. But he stared at me and I glowered back and then I understood: he knew what I was. He knew *who* I was. At the time, I thought this meant that he was incalculably old. Now, I am not so sure.

"Why do you stand before my gate? Tell me your purpose."

He stayed silent, of course. His impassive expression never wavered, and yet – perhaps from his slightly quivering shoulders or faintly irregular breathing – I had the impression that he was laughing at me.

It had been a long time since I had been the subject of even implied ridicule. Not many willingly mock a demon of the scorched desert. I had chosen one of my more forbidding guises before I opened the door. My skin was black as the sand, my naked body sexually ambiguous and covered with thousands of tiny horns that swivelled in whatever direction I looked. The horns had been one of Charm's ideas – the kind he gets when he's drunk on saltwater. At his request, I wore them on this occasion – the one day each cycle when I accept supplicants. I had thought that my appearance would be appropriately awe-inspiring, and yet from the look in the not-

quite-a-man's eyes, I realized that he had not been inspired to awe. I growled to cover my uneasiness – *what creature is this?*

I stormed back inside the house, sulphur gas streaming from between the growing cracks in my skin. The mist groaned when it touched me and then receded. I didn't need to look back at the man to know that he hadn't moved. Inside, door shut, I changed my appearance again. I became monstrous, a blue leviathan of four heads and sixteen impossible arms. I shook my wrists in succession, so the bracelets made of human teeth clacked and cascaded in a sinister echo off the walls of my castle.

Yes, I thought, faces snarling, *this should do.*

I stepped forward to open the door again and saw Mahi's face on the floor beneath me, grinning in two-dimensional languor.

"You look nice," he said. "Some upstart at the door? Drop him in the maw, Naeve. I'm sure it's been some time since she's had a nice meal."

The maw is Mahi's mother, but she rejected him because he can only move in two dimensions. She considered him defective, but I have found his defect to occasionally be very useful. He vents his anger by suggesting I toss every supplicant across the scorched desert into her mouth. I did once, nearly three hundred cycles ago, just for his benefit, but we could all hear the sound of her chewing and mating and screaming in some kind of inscrutable ecstasy for days.

Two of my faces snarled down at him, one looked away and the fourth just sighed and said, "Perhaps." The maw is all the way on the Eastern border of the desert, but that day her screams pierced as though she were gifting it to our ears – some property of the sand, I suppose. Charm, Top and I nearly went crazy, but Mahi seemed to enjoy it. My family is closer to me than the Trunk ever was, but I know no more about their previous lives than what they choose to tell me. I often wonder what Mahi's life was like inside the maw.

He faded into the floor, off in some two-dimensional direction I couldn't see. I stepped back outside.

The man was still there, absolutely motionless despite the veritable riot of mist-shapes that struggled to entangle him. My uneasiness returned: *what is he?* When he saw me, his eyes widened. No other muscles moved, and yet I knew. Oh, for that economy of expression. Even my malleable body could not convey with a hundred gestures the amusement and understanding and wary appreciation he expressed with a simple contraction of eye muscles. I did not scare him.

"Who are you?" I used my smallest head and turned the others away – the view of him through four sets of eyes was oddly intense, disconcerting. He didn't answer. "*What are you?*"

I turned my head to the deer who was kneeling peacefully at his side. "Why did you bring him, honoured one?" I said in the language of the butterfly men.

The deer looked up, purple eyes lovely enough to break a lesser creature's heart. Before I saw this man, I would have said that only

ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON

demons and butterfly men could look in the eyes of a deer and keep their sanity.

"Because he asked me," the deer said – gracefully, simply, infuriatingly.

I went back inside. Because I only had one more chance to get rid of him, I stalked the hallways, screaming and summoning things to toss at the walls. Top absorbed them with her usual equanimity and then turned the walls a shimmering orange – my favourite colour. Charm screamed from somewhere near the roof that he was attempting to rest, and could I please keep my temper tantrum to myself? I frowned and finished changing – it was a relief to have one set of eyes again. Some demons enjoy multiplicity, but I've always found it exhausting. Top turned that part of the wall into a mirror, so I could see my handiwork.

"It's very beautiful" she said. A hand emerged from the wall and handed me a long piece of embroidered cloth. I wrapped it around my waist, made my aureoles slightly larger and walked to the door.

The corners of his mouth actually quirked up when he saw me this time, and the understanding in his eyes made me ache. I did not believe it, and yet I did. I walked closer to him, doggedly swaying my mahogany hips, raising my arms and shaking my wrists, which were still encircled with bracelets of human teeth. This close I could see that his skin was unnaturally smooth – the only physical indication that he was something other than human.

"Come," I said, my voice pitched low – breathy and seductive in a human sort of way. "Just tell me your name, traveller, and I'll let you inside."

I leaned in closer to him, so our noses nearly touched. "Come," I whispered, "tell me."

His lips quirked again. Bile of frustration and rage choked my all-too-human throat and I began to lose my grip on my body. I could feel it returning to my mundane form, and after a moment I stopped trying to resist. My skin shifted from glowing mahogany to a prosaic cobalt blue. My hair turned wild and red; my second arms grew rapidly beneath the first and my aureoles contracted.

My skin tingled with frustration and not a little fear – I didn't need anyone else in my family – but I refused to show it as I took a passing glance in his eyes. No triumph there, not even relief.

I walked up the stairs, but I didn't hear his footsteps following. "Well," I said, gesturing with my left hands, "are you coming?"

The man took a step forward, and then another – he moved as though he were exhausted, or the cold of the maggots and mist had subtly affected him after all.

"Go home," he said to the deer, who had risen beside him. "One way or another, I will not need your help when I leave this place."

His voice made me want to weep tears so large Charm would dance beneath me, singing as though nectar were falling from the sky. It was uncompromisingly strong, yet tender all the same, as though he had seen too much not to grant anyone the tenderness he had been denied.

Do not believe it, I told myself, but I was already losing the battle.

"Are you coming?" I repeated, forced by unexpected emotion into a parody of callous disdain.

"Yes," he said quietly. I do not think I could have stood it if all that unexpected tenderness were suddenly directed at me, but he seemed distracted, watching the mist long after the deer had disappeared.

"What is your name?" I asked, just before I opened the door again. An unlikely gambit, of course, but I had to try.

Amusement suddenly retuned to his eyes. "I'm called Israphel," he said.

Mahi had positioned himself in front of the door in his best impression of three-dimensionality. It nearly worked, if you didn't look at him too critically, or move. He grew indistinct when viewed from oblique angles, until he disappeared altogether. His appearance was, in some ways, even more malleable than my own. For this occasion he had fashioned himself to look like one of the wildly costumed humans we sometimes saw in our travels: decked entirely in iridescent feathers of saffron and canary yellow, strewn together with beads that glinted in an imagined sunlight.

"You let him in?" Mahi shrieked, several octaves higher than normal. I've often wondered how a two-dimensional creature can create such startlingly loud sounds in a multi-dimensional universe.

Something in Israphel's demeanour exuded fascination, though when I looked closely at him I didn't know how I could tell – his expression was still one of polite interest.

"The maw's only son, I presume? I had heard she rejected you, but... this is an honour."

Mahi sniffed, put out at having been discovered so quickly. His feathers bristled. "Yes, well. A two-dimensional mouth is not particularly useful for three-dimensional food, is it?" He turned to me, his human mouth stretching and widening as it always did when he was hurt or angry. If it continued to expand, it would settle into a shape I sometimes found disturbing. Mahi was still, after all, the son of the most feared creature in the scorched desert. He grinned – cruelly – revealing several rows of teeth that appeared to be the silently wailing heads of countless ancient creatures.

"I'm surprised at you, Naeve," he said, his voice a studied drawl. "Confounded by a pesky human? Losing your touch, are you?"

I frowned at him, trying to decide if he was being deliberately obtuse. "He's not a human, Mahi," I said carefully.

Mahi's face had now been almost entirely subsumed by his hideous mouth, but he still managed to look thoughtful. "No...he isn't, is he? Well, I trust you'll get rid of him soon." He folded himself into some inscrutable shape and seemed to disappear.

Israphel turned to look at me. He smiled, and I felt my skin turning a deeper, more painful shade of blue. For a calculated moment, his eyes were transparent as windowpanes: amusement and fascination and just a trace of wonder...

By the Trunk, who is this man?

"What is my first task, Naeve?" he asked, very gently.

I turned away and walked blindly down a hall that had not been there a moment before. I didn't look, but I knew he was following.

I could practically feel his eyes resting on my back, radiating compassion and equanimity. Out of sheer annoyance, I shifted my body slightly so a gigantic purple eye blinked lazily on my back and then stared straight at him. I had hoped for some kind of reaction – a shriek of surprise, perhaps – but he simply nodded in polite understanding and looked away. His eyes focused on the indigo walls, and he jerked, ever so slightly, in surprise. For a moment I wished for a mouth as big and savage as Mahi's to grin with. I knew he had noticed the gentle rippling of Top's smooth

A TORRENT OF UNIDENTIFIABLE WASTE ROARED JUST BEHIND IT.

muscles. Israphel looked sharply at my back, but my third eye was beginning to make me feel dizzy, so I subsumed it back into my flesh. No use, I could still sense him.

I ran my hand along Top's indigo gizzards and silently drew the symbol for where I wanted to go. The walls shivered a little in her surprise – it had been nearly a hundred cycles since I had last visited there. But I needed to get rid of this not-a-man quickly, and it was in Top's second appendix that I had saved my cleverest, most wildly impossible task. Even Israphel, with all of his jade green understanding and hard-won wisdom would not be able to solve it.

A light blue membrane slammed across the corridor a few feet ahead of us, blocking the path. Seconds later, a torrent of unidentifiable waste roared just behind it, smelling of freshly digested nematodes and one-eyed birds. Top tried her best, but it was difficult to keep things clean this deep in her bowels. As soon as the last of the waste had gone past, the membrane pulled back and we continued. I surreptitiously glanced at Israphel, but his expression was perfectly bland. Too bland? I wasn't quite sure. Top shunted her waste past us several more times before we reached the entrance to her second appendix. The air here smelled funny, not quite foul but still capable of coating your throat with a thick, decaying mustiness.

"Are you sure about this, Naeve?" Top asked, just before she opened the membranous gate. "It's taking a lot of energy to shunt the digestive flows around you. I'm having difficulty keeping things up. Charm is complaining that his bed feels like cartilage."

"Charm always complains. Let us in."

Israphel paused before the open membrane. "Are you from the scorched desert?" he asked, addressing the walls as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I could tell that Top was just as mesmerized by his eyes as I was. Of course, she had always loved eyes – mostly for eating. *Perhaps I'll give his to her as a treat once he fails the task* – but the thought made me unexpectedly ill.

"No," Top said. "I'm the first of Naeve's family. She found me on another world."

Israphel frowned, such an unprecedented expression that it had the impact of a fiery declamation. "Another universe?" he said.

"I'm not sure. It's been many triads. You have quite beautiful eyes."

Israphel must have heard the predatory overtones, but he simply smiled and thanked her. Irrationally annoyed, I stepped through the opening into the chamber. Israphel followed me, glancing at the pulsing yellow walls and then the enormous heaps of bric-a-brac that littered the space. Some, including the one for my impossible task, had been there for countless cycles, but they were all immaculately clean. Dust was one of Top's favourite things to eat, which was one of the many reasons that made her an excellent castle.

I summoned the object to me – a fantastic, mysterious device that I had discovered on my travels and had saved for just this sort of emergency. In the far corner of the room something crashed to the floor as my object began its slow, lumbering way towards us. The humans of whatever place I had found it clearly hadn't designed their objects for summoning – it moved gingerly, as though its stubby wooden legs or wide, dark glass screen were in danger of breaking. It had a dark brown tail made of some strange smooth-shiny material that was forked at the end.

I had wanted to destroy his easy composure, and yet I still wasn't prepared for his reaction when he saw the object labouring towards him. He shook with laughter, his hands opening and closing as though they were desperate to hold onto something. He laughed, and yet his eyes nearly seared me. Top gave a sort of giggle-sigh that made the walls shudder. Was it the pain lurking behind his eyes that had made them so beautiful? But the pain wasn't lurking any more, it was pouring and splashing and nearly drowning both of us. I looked away – what else could I do?

He stopped laughing almost as abruptly as he started, with a physical wrench of his neck. "Where did you find this?" he asked quietly. It had shuddered to a halt in front of him.

"I don't really remember. Some human place."

He turned to me and smiled. I coughed. "The first human place," he said.

I tried to mask my dismay. "Do you recognize it?" I asked. None of my tasks were allowed to be technically impossible, but I had hoped that this one would be about as close as I could get.

"Yes. They didn't really look like this, when – yes, I do."

"What's it called?" I asked, intrigued despite myself.

"A tee-vee. Television. Terebi. Many other things in many other dead languages. So what task have you set me, oh demon of the scorched desert?"

His voice was slightly mocking, but raw, as though he hadn't quite gotten over the shock.

"You have to make it work," I said.

Back through Top's lower intestines, he carried it in his arms – carefully, almost lovingly, the way I imagine humans carry their babies. I had often pitied humans because of their static bodies and entirely inadequate one pair of arms, but Israphel did not ask for my help and I did not offer. Awkward though he was, he still managed to look dignified.

By the time we reached the end of her intestine, Top had managed to redecorate the front parlour. I can't say I was entirely pleased with the changes – fine, gauzy cloth of all different shades of green draped gently from the ceiling, rippling in an invisible breeze. The floor was solid, but appeared to be the surface of a lake. It reflected the sky of an unknown world – jade green, just like Israphel's eyes.

I could have killed her, only it was notoriously difficult to kill a castle. Instead, I felt my skin tinting red, like my hair.

Israphel gently set the tee-vee down on the rippling lake floor and looked around contemplatively.

"It's quite nice," he said to the ceiling. "I thank you."

Top knew how angry I was, so the only response she dared was a kind of wistful 'good luck' that made me turn even redder. My own family!

Perhaps, after all, they wanted a...

I didn't even want to think of it.

"You have until first light," I said curtly, and walked straight into a nearby wall.

Hours later, when twilight had sunk onto the scorched desert and the maggots were giving their farewell light show as they burrowed deeper into the sand, Charm found me. I knew he was there because of the peculiar smell wafted towards my nose this

SMELLING OF FRESHLY DIGESTED NEMATODES AND ONE EYED BIRDS

high in castle – that tang of fresh saltwater could only mean that Charm had been drinking again.

"He's interesting, that fellow," Charm said in a studied drawl.

"You noticed?" I summoned several balls and began juggling them in intricate patterns – a nervous habit.

"Not really human, but... I mean, he doesn't smell like one, he doesn't smell like anything I've ever encountered, but he still *feels* like one. Looks like one. The way he stares at that tee-vee thing of yours? Very human."

I nearly fumbled my balls and had to create an extra hand just to keep the pattern going. "He's succeeding, then? He'll get it to work?"

"I don't know. He isn't doing anything, just sitting there. But still... something's just funny about him. Powerful, that much is obvious." He paused. "Mahi is sulking," he said, after a few moments.

I let out a brief laugh. "Typical. Does he really think I'll let this man succeed?"

"I don't know, will you?"

I lost the pattern of the balls entirely, and glared in the direction I guessed Charm was – a challenge even when he wasn't trying to hide.

"Don't be stupid," I said as the balls clacked and bounced on the floor. "I've lived this long without a... why would I need him now?"

Charm laughed and I caught a strong whiff of saltwater. "Why, indeed? But Top was telling me about your fixation with his eyes, his broken nose –"

"My fixation..."

"You can't fool us, Naeve. We're your family. Why else do you think Mahi's sulking? Maybe you're lonely."

"But I already have all of you."

"Not that type of lonely, Mother." I felt him lean forward until his breath tickled my ear. "Mahi and I could never have passed the third test." His deep whisper sounded louder than an earthquake. "But he can." His voice grew fainter and I knew he was vanishing in his own strange way – different parts of him at once.

His voice was the last to leave. "Are you lonely, Naeve?"

I sat frozen at the top of my castle, staring at the blackened desert with its shivering, luminescent sand for several minutes. Then, almost involuntarily, I conjured an image of Israphel.

He was sitting in the parlour where I had left him, a few feet away from the tee-vee. His brows were drawn up in concentration and his fingers occasionally stroked the strange object's forked tail. I stared at him for minutes, then hours – how many, I'm not sure. He never stirred, but once in that long night he whispered someone's name. I couldn't hear him clearly, but I saw his lips move and the pain that briefly flitted across his eyes.

"Was I lonely?"

I waited for the dawn.

First day light. Mahi awoke me from my trance-like stupor, wiping out the vestiges of Israphel's image with a flick of his two-dimensional tongue. He was all mouth this morning and his grotesquely abundant teeth were screaming a morning aria that I supposed might be pleasurable to the son of a creature who climaxed while she chewed.

"You seem happy, Charm told me you were sulking."

"Why would I sulk? Our green eyed intruder has failed!"

I sat up straight and stared at him. "Failed? How do you know?"

He cackled like a magpie and his teeth groaned with him.

Positively unnerving, even for me. "He hasn't moved. He's just sat

there all night, and the tee-vee hasn't done a thing. Go down and see for yourself."

He compressed himself into a line and started darting around me, giggling even as his teeth wailed like damned souls.

"I knew you wouldn't let him pass, Naeve," he said, flattening himself out again. "Are you coming? I want to see you toss him out."

My throat felt like someone had lit a fire to it. "Soon," I croaked.

After he left, I turned to stare back out at the desert. The maggots had started popping back out of the sand, making crackling noises like the sound of bones being slowly crushed. Light sprayed and twisted in the rapidly thickening air as they emerged. Just from the timbre of the pops, low and crunchy, I could tell that it must be fairly late in the season. In two days, perhaps, the desert would have its lights. I couldn't remember the last time I had been here to see it, but my sudden longing was mixed with dread.

If Mahi was wrong like I thought – hoped? – then in two days we would all see something more than just the lights.

By the time I arrived, the others were all there, staring silently at Israphel who stared just as silently back at them. Even Top had fashioned a body for herself for the occasion – a seductive brown human connected to the wall with an orange umbilical cord. He still sat on the floor, the tail of the tee-vee balanced on the tips of his fingers. It appeared that what Mahi said was true – he had not got it to work. The object looked just the same as it had yesterday. I fought a surge of disappointment. After all, why should I be disappointed? Just one less nuisance in my life. I could still stay and watch the lights if I wanted.

Israphel looked up as soon as I appeared, and a smile briefly stretched his hard lips. My nipples hardened and I felt Charm flit over them with an almost-silent laugh.

"There, I've been waiting for you," he said. The night had brought shadows under his eyes, and he held himself with a dignified exhaustion that made him seem very human.

"I've completed the task," he said, when I didn't respond.

Mahi giggled and then stopped when Top glared at him. "You have?" I said, walking closer. "I don't see anything."

"Watch," he said. The black glass on the tee-vee flickered for a few moments and then seemed to come to life.

Strange shapes darted and moved inside the box. After a second I realized that they were human, but oddly seemed to resemble Mahi more than any humans I had ever encountered.

Mahi shrieked and rushed closer to the glass. "What is this? What is this thing?"

An odd, distorted voice came from inside the tee-vee: "What time is it?" I realized that one of the flat humans was speaking.

"It's howdy doody time!" smaller humans with gratingly high-pitched voices shouted in chorus.

I turned to Israphel, whose skin was faintly glowing with a sheen of sweat. "How did you do this?" I asked. But before he could answer, Mahi shrieked again – probably in delight, though it was difficult to tell through the distorted sound on the tee-vee. He had managed to enter the picture.

Israphel watched with every appearance of rapt fascination as the humans scattered from Mahi's giant jaws, screaming and blubbering. He gathered up three small stragglers with one swipe of his blood-red tongue and began mashing them up with

ISRAHEL WATCHED WITH EVERY APPEARANCE OF RAPT FASCINATION

his teeth. In fact, his teeth themselves seemed to gobble up the two-dimensional humans, and when they finished they spit the masticated globs deep into Mahi's apparently bottomless throat.

He tore through the humans, screaming as he ate them, like his mother had all those cycles ago, and laughed at their obvious terror. "You're all like me, now," I thought I heard him say, but his mouth was too full of screaming humans for me to be sure.

"Unbelievable," Charm said beside me. "I never knew the kid had it in him."

Minutes later, there were no more humans left on the screen. Mahi had relaxed himself into a vaguely anthropomorphic shape – more like a giant mouth with legs and arms – and was reclining in a steaming vat of blood and still-twitching body parts. He giggled and splashed some of the blood at the screen.

"More...want more?" His words were slurred, as though he was drunk on the killing. "Give more," he said, and giggled again.

"How odd," Israphel said softly. "It must be a property of this universe."

"Naeve," Top said, sounding torn between disgust and envy, "get him out of there. That many humans at once can't be healthy."

"Can you?" I asked Israphel.

He shrugged and let go of the forked tail. Immediately, the screen went black again and Mahi came hurtling back out. I expected him to wail and throw a tantrum, but he was surprisingly quiet as he turned his mouth towards me.

"Keep him," he said. Then he fell down and drifted straight through the floor.

Israphel stood up gingerly, as though his bones ached. "I take it that I've passed the first test," he said.

I nodded, afraid to even speak. The very novelty of what he had just done terrified me.

"And the second?" he said, very gently, as though he understood my fear and wished to reassure me.

"Tell me who you are. Why are you here?"

He seemed surprised, which I took a perverse pleasure in, considering that I was just as surprised myself. Why had I laid such a simple task? But as any sign of emotion fled his face, I realized that perhaps I had stumbled upon an adequate task after all. He didn't want to tell me, but if he wanted to stay, he would.

"Top, Charm," I said, suddenly. "Leave us." They left with hardly a murmur, since of course I could hardly stop them from eavesdropping.

Israphel stared at me silently while I smiled and settled myself against the rippled lake-floor.

"I take it you don't want to tell me," I said.

"You don't want to know."

"I'm waiting," I said. "You have until second day light."

Hours passed in silence. I amused myself by changing my body into various imaginative – and perfectly hideous – forms. A gigantic pair of jaws as close to Mahi's mouth as I could manage emerged from my stomach, growling and sweeping its fleshy tongue over the floor. Israphel, staring with a bizarre intentness at the wall behind me, didn't even flinch. I looked over my shoulder once to see what could possibly be so interesting, but of course the wall was blank. Whatever horrors Israphel witnessed that night, they were of his own creation. A thousand tiny arms

sprouted from my face and filled the room with the cascading sound of snapping fingers. That, at least, he acknowledged with a slight upward quirk of his lips.

The night dragged on. I wondered if he would remain silent, if he would choose death over revealing his identity. The implications disturbed me on many levels, none of which I particularly wished to examine.

The floor still looked like a lake, and quite possibly was one, since various fauna periodically swam beneath us. A fish – the colour of days-old dung and large as my torso – passed underneath me and paused just before Israphel. Its jagged teeth peeked over its lips and a strange appendage on its forehead gave off an ethereal glow that cast our faces in shadow.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I said, without really meaning to.

He turned to look at me, and I flinched. "Beautiful? In its own way, I suppose. But it's not of this world."

"Maybe from Top's world, then?" But after a moment I realized what he had implied. "No...from yours. From the human world." He remained silent, and despite myself I was drawn out. "Time acts strangely in our universe, but something tells me that when you travelled here, your human world had long since been destroyed. So how would you know what creatures once lived on it? Unless...are you one of those humans? The ones reborn on the other side of the desert?" The very idea seemed ludicrous. Those humans were barely capable of seeing the desert, let alone crossing it.

The fish dimmed its light and swam away, leaving us again in semi-darkness.

"Can you die, Naeve?" he asked.

I snorted. "Am I alive?"

"But old age can't kill you. Or disease...probably not even an atomic bomb."

"I'm not human, so why would I die in a human way?"

He looked at me so intently that I felt my skin begin to shiver and glow in response. If his expression hadn't been so serious and inexplicably sad I would have thought he was courting me – I had only ever seen that kind of stare from a demon of the third sex who wanted to mate.

"What do you think happens when you die?"

"My body will take its final journey, back to the Trunk. The Trunk will crush my bones and my siblings will masticate my flesh and I will be remembered by my etching in the bark."

His eyes narrowed and I struggled to stop my skin from mottling iridescent ochre and gold. Sex ought to be lovely and ephemeral, but with him I knew it would mean far more. I couldn't afford to reveal my desire.

"The prospect doesn't scare you?" he said, as though it would certainly terrify him. "What about an afterlife?"

I gave a disbelieving smile. "Afterlife? You mean, some sort of soul-essence surviving somewhere after death? Who believes that but humans? Though," I said thoughtfully, "I suppose you humans might have a point. Wherever you come from, a few of you are reborn here. Maybe this is your afterlife?"

Israphel clenched his hands so tightly I could hear the constricted blood pounding through his veins. "And what of those humans reborn here? And what of their children? None of them die of old age either, but they can be killed. What do you think happens, Naeve, when you die in your own afterlife?"

AS THE HUMANS SCATTERED FROM MAHI'S GIANT JAWS, SCREAMING

I gave up and let my skin explode into whorls and starbursts of colour. In the extra light, I could see how the grief I had only glimpsed before now twisted his face.

"I don't know," I said. "I never thought about it before. But I assume the humans feed the maggots, just like the rest of us. Does this have a point, Israphel? You don't have much time until daylight."

He briefly closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the pain had nearly left his face.

"Let me tell you a story, Naeve, about a human boy who became a post-human and then became a god."

I looked at him curiously. "Is that what you are?"

He shrugged. "It's what I might as well be. Or an angel. A Nephilim, perhaps?" He smiled bitterly, as though at some private joke. "So I was born on the first human world – Earth, as it was unimaginatively called at the time. After humans had travelled to space but long before we really colonized it. I grew roses – like the ones in this world, only you couldn't use the thorns for impaling stakes. I had a wife who liked to write stories about monsters and death."

"You're married? Then you can't – "

His sudden glare was so inimical that I cut myself short. "She died," he said, his words clipped staccato, "when she was thirty-five. An eon later, I discovered that she had been reborn here and that she died here too – nearly a triad ago, by your count." He was silent for a few moments and then answered my unspoken question. "She tried to cross the desert."

"Which is why you're here?"

"Yes. No. Not entirely."

"What else, then?"

"To retrieve the last of the humans, the ones we spent centuries hunting for before we found this strange pocket universe. Do you know how statistically improbable it is that a universe so unlike anything ever burped into the cosmos could exist? We didn't even realize it until the computers showed a discrepancy of precisely one billionth of a percent between the predicted numbers of retrieved humans and actual ones. But I already knew something was wrong, because no one could retrieve my wife. So I came here, and I realized – a person can't exist in two places at once, and they can't be retrieved if they don't exist at all."

I had spent my life travelling between universes, and yet what Israphel was implying boggled me. Humans were that dominant in his time? "This retrieval... you mean, you're trying to revive every human who ever existed?"

"And every one who might have existed. Those are easier. It's a moral duty."

"But... that must be... do numbers that large exist? Where could you possibly get the resources?"

His eyes looked very hard, and the last of my sexual arousal shivered as it left my skin. "You don't want to know," he said. "It will be easier for you if you don't."

"Or you don't want to tell me."

He met my eyes, but twitched as though he longed to look away. Some strange emotion was tearing at him, I could tell that by his posture, but what? "Other universes," he said, his voice rough. "We strip other universes, and then convert them to power sources, and when they burn out, we find other ones."

Of course. Now I understood the elusive emotion: guilt.

"That's why you're here?" I said. My eyes turned glassy and golden as magma with anger. "To save all the humans and then destroy this universe and every other creature in it? What about saving us? Does your moral imperative only apply to yourselves?"

He looked away and stared at the lake floor. "It would be a never-ending task. Humans take care of humans." It sounded like a mantra, something recited frequently to stave off doubts or reason.

I snorted in self-fury – I had thought better of him. "I'm sure they told you to believe that. And you call us demons. Of all the monumentally selfish... I suppose you came here and petitioned me so you could use my powers to hunt down the stragglers from your project?" I laughed, high and brittle. And I had thought I was too old to feel such bitter disappointment.

I elongated my lower left arm and forced him to meet my eyes. He looked positively tormented, which pleased me. "You would kill me too, wouldn't you? If you get your way, you would use me and then strip this universe and kill me too."

He grimaced and roughly knocked my hand away. "I'll find a way to save you – "

"And my family?"

He remained silent, but met my eyes.

I sighed. "No, of course not. Well," I said softly, leaning in closer and letting my eyes burn so hot he flinched, "lucky for us that you won't succeed."

"Naeve... I told you what you demanded. I've passed the second task, and you know it. You can't break your own law."

I smiled. "You want your third task, human? First tell me, you wish to become a member of my family, but which one? I already have three children. Would you be my fourth child? Or someone else?"

"Someone else," he said.

My turn to dance. "Who?"

The unexpected compassion in his smile made me feel like tearing at my skin. "Your husband," he said.

I leaned so close our noses touched. "Then your task is to please me." Before I could pull away, his eyes caught mine and his fingers gently traced my lips.

Abruptly, I stood up. "You'll have to do better than that," I said, shaking. I turned my back on him and headed towards the nearest hallway.

"Don't let him leave," I said to Top. Even after the wall had solidified behind me, I had the eerie sensation that I could feel those unfathomable eyes on my back.

I lay on the roof, shivering and devouring bits of Trunk bark laced with black sand. Usually this treat comforted me, reminded me of my childhood, but today it merely deepened my loneliness. Oh, I had a family but I was still lonely. Israphel's presence made me realize it – if only because of how much I had foolishly hoped he would comfort me. He was lonely, too – anyone could sense that – but he had chosen to deal with it by brainwashing himself to a cause whose end result was the complete eradication of the non-human universe.

My hysterical laughter became confused with sobs and I fell asleep.

When I woke, it was dark. The maggots had buried themselves for the night, but in the final stage of their metamorphosis they glowed so brightly that their light was visible even through the sand. The desert now looked like the skin of a giant black leopard.

HE MET MY EYES, BUT TWITCHED AS THOUGH HE LONGED TO LOOK

The maggots would die too, if Israphel succeeded.

Charm lightly brushed my shoulder and offered me a jug filled with saltwater. I took a swig just to be polite – saltwater didn't affect me the same way. He took it back, and when he drank I could momentarily see the outline of his long neck and squat torso. When he first petitioned I wondered what his face looked like, or if he even knew. Now I figured that he didn't – why else would he drink so much?

"Desert's beautiful," he said. "I think they'll change this morning. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "I remember...they were changing the day I cut off from the Trunk...I thought all the world would be that beautiful."

Hard to believe we were the same person; that young demon crawling out of her sac, covered in amniotic fluid, staring in mesmerized joy at the swarms of fluttering light...

"Will he really destroy all this?" Charm asked.

"I'll kill him in the morning, but others will come. I think there may be too many of them."

Charm took a long pull from the jug. "You know why I like salt water?" he said. "It tastes like tears. I had some of yours while you were sleeping. I hope you don't mind."

I shook my head. "What did they taste like?" I asked.

"Bitter, like despair. Like disappointed love. I don't think you should kill him."

"What else can I do? Let him kill all of us?"

"He keeps asking a question down there. Top wouldn't disturb you but I thought you should know. He says: 'Do the humans here know that the desert will kill them?'"

I looked sharply at him – or at least, his bottle. "Do the *humans* know? Of course they do. They know jumping off a cliff will kill them too. What kind of a question is that?"

Charm's breath dusted my ear. "His wife, Naeve," he said.

I stood up and started running down the stairs.

Israphel looked startled – almost afraid – when I burst into the room.

"Come," I said, grabbing his elbow. I dragged him to the front doors and pushed them open with my right hands. We stumbled down the steps and onto the sand, where the buried maggots wiggled away from our feet. I bent down and plucked one from its lair. I held its squirming form between us – it was a particularly fine specimen: juicy and fat and bright enough to make him squint. I grew a third arm on the left side of my body – glowing mahogany, just like the human body I had used in my failed attempt to seduce Israphel that first day.

"This is a human hand," I said. "Watch what happens."

Steeling myself, I dropped the maggot on my new left palm. Immediately, it started burrowing into my flesh, devouring my skin and blood in great maggot-sized chunks. It chomped through my bones with reckless abandon and I gasped involuntarily. My hand had nearly fallen off by the time it finished gorging and settled itself in the ruined, bloody mass of my palm.

"Do you see?" I said between gritted teeth. I needed to withdraw the nerve endings, but not before Israphel understood. "This is just one maggot. You can find this out without dying. Anyone who lives alongside the desert knows what they do. I've heard the humans even sometimes harvest the maggots for their farms. They all know.

How long was your wife here before she went to the desert?"

He swallowed slowly, as though his throat was painfully constricted. "By your count...seventeen triads."

"She was older than me...time enough to die."

He started to cry, but they were furious tears, and I knew better than to touch him. "What if she didn't know? What if she lived far from the desert, and when she came here no one told her –"

I picked up the maggot – which was by now nearly the size of my palm – and held it in front of his face. "Look! *She knew*. She was older than me, Israphel, and I am very old. She knew." I let the maggot drop into the sand and withdrew my ruined hand back into my body.

He sank to his knees. I knelt down so my face was even with his. "Do you know how demons die?" I said softly.

He shook his head.

"We choose," I said. "If we wanted to, we could live forever, but every demon dies. Some die sooner than others, but we all, eventually, make the choice. Death doesn't scare me, Israphel, but eternity does. Seventeen triads is a very long time."

"We could have been together forever," he said.

"No one wants forever, even if they don't realize it. I imagine that your project hasn't been operating long enough to discover this, but it's true...life is sweet because life is finite. Do you *really* want to live forever?"

He met my eyes for a moment and gave a brief, painful smile. My skin started tingling again. "No," he said.

The ground began to shake, softly at first, then more violently. Then came the sound I remembered so well – a low, buzzing hum that gouged my ears and made my spine shiver. The lights under the sand grew even brighter. Israphel looked around – curious, wary but certainly not scared. It was a good attitude for someone who planned to live with me. I started laughing, first in soft giggles and then in unstoppable peals. I lay down in the sand to get closer to the buzzing. When I felt Israphel touch my cheek, I laughed even more and pulled him on top of me with all four of my arms.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The lights!" I couldn't seem to explain any more. While I laughed he kissed me slowly – first my eyes, then my mouth, then my nipples. I was coming by the time the maggots burst from the sand, metamorphosed from fat little worms to gigantic, glowing moths. They swirled around us, dipping into my hair and alighting on Israphel's fuzzy scalp.

"I'm going to fight you, Israphel," I said. "I won't let you destroy my universe just because you passed the third task."

His laugh was deep, like the buzzing just before the lights. "I wouldn't have expected otherwise," he said.

We held each other as we rolled around on the sand, buffeted on all sides by the glowing moths. The maggot that had eaten my hand had also metamorphosed and now swooped on its gigantic wings down towards our faces, as though to greet us before flying away.

"What happens after you die, Naeve?" Israphel asked – softly, as though he didn't expect an answer.

"Nothing," I said.

And then we laughed and stood and I danced with my husband in the lights.

Alaya has never dined on anything as outlandish as maggots (deliberately), but she can frequently be found eating unusual food in out-of-the-way restaurants around New York City.

AWAY. SOME STRANGE EMOTION WAS TEARING AT HIM. BUT WHAT?

THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE FROM CREEM MAGAZINE, DECEMBER 11, 2000



Thinking the Unthinkable About Ronald Reagan

by Lester Bangs

I never even listen to the radio today, or for that matter have any opinion of it, because it's so bad I don't even bother. Devoted readers of my columns in *The Nation* and *The New York Times* no doubt remember my pretensions at music journalism, back when I was still flying on the dumb shit and drunk all the time.

Mainstream rock is leisure-time white noise now, product to consume, Rebellion Brought To You By... New Wave balked at the post and never followed up on itself. There has to be some kind of Renaissance. Someday. I'm still waiting to wade through this current sea of opportunistic trendies to find it.

In any case, I hate writing about music. Once upon a time, there could have been a real rock 'n roll renaissance. Before 1980,

You might say I'm going out on a limb when you hear the rest. But I'm not the only scribbler who thinks so. Pull up a seat and I'll tell you from the top.

Jann Wenner once told me I'm disrespectful to musicians. Not all of them. Back when Wenner threw me off the staff of his late and not-personally-lamented *Rolling Stone*, Punk Rawk was still a glimmer of hope for rock 'n roll, rather than its current zombie incarnation too stupid to realize it's walking around losing body parts.

In its original form, rock 'n roll was... I don't know... Human. It was supposed to make you feel alive. It was a state of mind, a way of approaching life, not a strict form. I can't explain it, but I knew it when I experienced it then.

But *Rolling Stone* was a horrible place and I hated it. It was basically one of those little fiefs where you've got a bunch of late-stage hippie idealists and one guy making money off them all. There were a lot of things that were real fucked up and sick and slimy and kind of decadent about it.

I didn't want to be used like that just to sell product. I'm not a shill. If that meant I had to say every record sucked, I thought back then, so be it. I had no idea where I could go with such a bad attitude, but there was no other way I could be.

My responsibility as I saw it then was not to help new bands sell records, but to keep the reader from buying a record they're going to take home and hate because it's a bucket of shit, then hate my guts too because I told them to buy it.

The bands I interviewed, even then, were just people. You'd think, with all the adulation, rock 'n' roll musicians would appreciate one guy telling them they sucked. But no one wanted writing with vitality. I had to fight to get it in.

So went my long Lost Weekend, back before the Dead Kennedys gig at the Long Goodbye in Portland, Oregon, and the drunken ride back with John Callahan that ended in John's pussy-wagon getting wrapped around a tree. Back when I was still young and dumb enough to live for the moment instead of One Day At A Time.

It sucked. It all sucked dogs equally. I might have lived a long time, but I wouldn't have lived very long as a good writer.

I need to smash that particular soapbox to bits beneath myself. I tend to beat people over the heads with things. That's something I'm still trying to work on, to recover from. I'm too moralistic and preachy. I should knock that shit off. Don't you think so?

My point is, without that car wreck, and the Program, my book of New York stories wouldn't have been written in peace and quiet down there at P.J. O'Rourke's *haci* in Cuernavaca. I got to take a step back, then, and do something that had nothing to do with music.

I threw all the other crap out and shot the new mania through my lobes and out through my tapping feet and typing fingers. I wolfed it down, and it only left me hungry for more.

For me, writing became rock 'n' roll. No mistakes in this world. Whatever it all means. I'm only looking back for the first time now.

I dreamed of being an investigative journalist when I was a kid. Now I'm doing it. Repeatedly. As long as you use your own past as the only true yardstick, that gets you through the times when you ask yourself "Why am I still doing this shit?"

I really needed to get out of New York to start doing the writing I had to do. There's just too many people jammed in there all the time. The quality of life there irritates me, and it just gets worse. America's like that in general, angry and aggro and lifeless. In the old days, I preferred anxiety to depression. But two broken eggs don't make an omelette. I had to go lie on the beach for a while and not think about any of that.

Muckraking was what I always wanted to do. I'm doing it now. I figure that that's the most important thing. Anyone can be a critic. Everyone is. Just look at the magazines. Everyone wants to write about rock, but none of them have the balls to pick up a guitar and jam out.

Everybody's a frustrated musician. But after I got some solid sobriety and hung out with the last of the CBS journalists for a few years, I felt like I had a new track. No more nightmares about never finishing the first album with my band, never getting any radio airplay. I let the band fizzle out when P.J. took me under his big dark wing.

I thought we were going to be the greatest joke-band ever. Hah. Nobody can be objective about anything they create. Artists are always their own worst critics, and need to leave the job to others besides themselves.

It's weird, when you're old and pondering the past. You've got to be honest about what you find there. The way I look at it, the only reason I have any credibility in the first place is because I'm willing to tell it like it is. And if anything like Reagan does happen again, I'll have more credibility for the fact that I said these things now.

I don't know. I double back on myself so much. In any case, I'd like to thank Richard Meltzer, Paul Nelson and the rest of the staff at *Cream*, for allowing me to make this exception to my own rules. I told them: Look, you better print this or give me the reason why. Richard wept when he got the fax of my notes for this thing. For once, I shut up when I heard.

It was twenty years ago today. The headlines still ring in my ears. It all still stuns and fries me every time I think about it, and makes me sicker by far than Philip K. Dick's most scabrous dreams.

Remember where you were, what you were doing, the day President Reagan was shot in cold blood on Broadway in Manhattan, in what will now be remembered as the last presidential motorcade in American history?

The assassin, who was in this country under false papers, bucked off two clean shots before the Secret Service took him down. Who could forget those horrifying *Time* magazine photographs of Barbara Bush in her blue gown splattered with her

husband George's brains? Lennon's second shot decapitated Reagan's running mate in the back seat, and Babs knelt and wailed in the road forever on celluloid before the Secret Service whisked her up into a different limo.

Who can forget the calm, sophisticated manner in which then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig took charge that blustery day, or his rocket-ride into the Oval Office? Hunter Thompson called Haig's regurgitated Reaganism "voodoo economics," for which Hunter will be remembered forever, before dying of the flu following the Dead later that same year.

Haig was gonna stimulate economic growth, curb inflation, increase employment, strengthen national defense, cut taxes and Government expenditures, and not deviate no matter how much it cost, a Raw Deal that would have made even Nixon blush.

"It's Morning in America," Haig told us, promising family values and a return to Norman Rockwell... Until that business in the Oval Office with that intern, that Ann Coulter person with the daytime talk show now. Haig wasn't even out of his First Hundred Days, either. Boy, did they grill him.

But ask anyone about December 11, 1980, and you either get "I wasn't alive then," "Oh, yeah, what was the old guy's name?" or the usual party line about The Great National Tragedy.

National tragedy. I'll conditionally agree, although not in the way it's usually meant. It became the first domino in a national travesty. Looking back, so few people remember that it was also the awful, Sophoclean end of a musical tragedy. And fuck you too, Fox News. I'm saying it now.

I can't mourn Ronald Reagan. Not since his daughter Patti Davis leaked his diaries to the *Times* for a sum so obscene I won't even mention it in print. With Cowboy Ronnie gone to Boot Hill, Lt. Col. North and Defense Secretary Weinberger were only too quick to sing like the throstle with his note so true.

When we mourn Ronald Reagan, we are mourning the last American cowboy myth and the fungus on its sick white underbelly. In the end, we are only mourning ourselves.

I don't believe in Ronald Reagan. I just believe in me. As the late Dr. Thompson put

it, facts are stubborn things. Reagan's diaries went back to his tenure as president of the Screen Actors' Guild, when he was twisted hard right from the Democrats by Senator Joe. Reagan toured the country stumping for conservatism and blackballing suspected Communists as McCarthy's own witch-hunting Increase Mather when Dick Nixon was engaged on other business.

He rode Chicago Mob union money from MCA into the Governor's mansion in California by a million-vote landslide in 1966, touting an imaginary "Moral Majority" while cranking MCA's anti-trust scam ethos up to the national level. Funny how the president of the Republican National Committee in 1979, Paul Laxalt, was hip deep in the pocket of the Chicago Mob too. *Lest We Forget.*

Any way around it, on December 11, 1980 (a month and change before he would have taken office) President-elect Reagan was shot and fatally wounded by a street person later identified as former Beatles frontman John Winston Lennon.

The Beatles had been banned from American radio airplay fourteen years prior. Paul McCartney was busy with his atrocious G.E. Smith/Marc Ribot-spawned "jam band," whatever the hell that means. The rest of the group was out of the limelight and licking their wounds.

And John? Well... There I can only speculate.

No one wants to remember John Winston Lennon as anything but an assassin. To me, that is a screaming injustice, and the one thing that could make me dust off my too-small "rock journalist" hat all these years later.

I remember John as seeming somehow doomed from the word go. Even the aunt who raised him said that the guitar was okay, but he could never make any money at it.

In the late '50s, when John Lennon and Paul McCartney were central members of The Quarrymen, John lionized the working class because his own suburban upbringing had cracked down the middle. He had the most charm and social grace of any member in the group. No one would have guessed from his starry-eyed poet exterior that his father abandoned the family, or that his party-animal mom dumped him off with his Aunt Mimi and promptly got run over by a drunk off-duty cop.

John married his college sweetheart Cynthia Powell in 1962 on Christmas Eve

at the same Register Office where John's parents were married in 1938. Cynthia was already knocked-up with Lennon's only child. John began repeating his own abandonment by taking a whirlwind tour of Europe well into Cynthia's second trimester and beyond.

John was known as the Great Romeo of the band then, from the post-gig bacchanals that never made the papers. No one in the band's coterie was to ever mention his wife or child. Julian was born the following year while his father was out spearheading a band that was busy changing the face of rock.

The corporate press made The Beatles out to be clean-cut lads on perpetual holiday with their families. But like Ray Charles before him, Lennon's genius was forever altered by the exponentiating needle holes in his arms. John Lennon began to die then. But sex and drugs couldn't even touch his genius, which made the next few years all the more tragic.

Everything looked rosy at first. The Quarrymen became The Silver Beetles, with Brian Jones now on drums and John Entwistle replacing Stu Sutcliffe on bass. Entwistle fell in love with a fashion photographer in Hamburg named Astrid

Kircherr, who invented the Beatle haircut and their signature suits before sleeping her way through the band and moving on.

In August of 1962, the Beatles were still bitter about not getting signed yet. They were tired of being Liverpool's pets. John wanted to start a fake spinoff band, Randy and the Rockets, who would play in costumes and masks and just go have fun without all the fine-print bullshit of their growing fame.

No matter how much they wanted to spread their wings, though, the Fab Four always returned to play to packed houses of drunks and underage teenyboppers at their favorite gig ever, the Cavern Club in Liverpool. After their last encore on the night of August 8, 1962, a man shoved his way through throngs of screaming girls up onto the stage to shake hands with John. That man was MCA Records golden boy Chuck Berry.

John wept. Chuck had heard of them through a bluesman friend up the coast in Blackpool, and decided to come hear what all the fuss was about. They were signed to MCA that week.

Doomed, doomed, doomed, I tell you. Their success was as inevitable as it was terminal. By December, their first EP single (containing, among other things, a cover of Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" and a rewrite of the Five Keys' "Ling Ting Tong") was released.

Doomed. Their next single ("P.S. I Love You"/"Love Me Do") ate up American charts with a bullet. The following year's *Meet The Beatles* album nearly ruined John's voice because of "Twist and Shout", and their seminal "Wild Thing". (The latter was the first song I ever described in *The Stone* as punk rock. But that's another column.)

Cynthia Lennon said later that she was actually shocked when she heard about the group's excesses while touring. Bullshit. She couldn't have not known. By the end, John was nursing an oil-burning junk habit and only coming home to their huge mansion in Surrey a few weeks out of the year.

In his own head, he was Alexander the Great with no more worlds to conquer. John's marriage and his family were already over. He left them standing at the station while he rode Casey Jones' fabled Old '97 to the top of the pop charts. No one thought they could guide him once Cynthia gave up trying.

In 1966, in a moment of speedball-induced babble, John told a reporter from

Where would we be if Reagan had survived?



Life magazine that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. He sure knew how to make friends... Like Governor Reagan, who apparently had a subscription to *Life*.

In the huge public outcry that followed, Cowboy Ronnie banned The Beatles from every venue in California, and pulled their records from the stores and the radio. MCA disowned them. The rest of the country were quick to follow suit. J. Edgar revoked their visas. President Johnson called them "Un-American."

The group limped along for half a year after that. John was preoccupied with dating a Japanese avant-garde artist named Yoko Ono, and not very much on-task in the studio. Paul McCartney gave John a written letter of resignation, which reportedly spawned a fistfight in Liverpool's Winchester Pub. "I only stayed in this band for the band's sake," he wrote. Legend has it that John's reply was something like "Bollocks."

The two had been best friends. It was Paul who wanted John to keep fronting the band from the first tours on. But The Beatles were tired. We know, legends aside, that Paul knocked John down the front stairs at the Winchester. John sustained head injuries from which he never recovered, suffering from headaches and blackouts until he disappeared from the public eye a little while later.

Yoko cared for him round-the-clock at first. However, John was so miserable and debilitated by his injuries that she eventually left in disgust, and went on to become a protégée of musical-wallpaperist composer Philip Glass. (Ono made the papers just recently due to her civil-union ceremony with New York Philharmonic concertmistress Laurie Anderson. At least they came out of it okay.)

In 1968, John released his first and only solo album, *All You Need Is Love*, by mail from Liverpool through Allen Cohen's underground Open City Records in San Francisco. (The worldwide success of the album made Cohen a millionaire.)

All You Need Is Love was a cry from Hell, a *magnum opus* unparalleled by any Beatles effort. It had a full orchestra. It had Tuli Kupferberg on backup vox, and The Fugs on three full tracks. It had experimental sounds and progressive music.

It had 'Strawberry Fields'. It had 'Give Peace A Chance', It had 'Cold Turkey', 'Mother' and 'God'... and 'Imagine'. And no one wants to remember. Comma. DAMMIT.

John's swan song came soon after, in 1968, an entirely instrumental score. Who could forget the bone-chillingly beautiful soundtrack to Martin Scorsese and Nikos Kazantzakis' Oscar-winning Bible epic *The Passion of the Christ*? John must have still been sorry about the Jesus thing. Though his name no longer appears in the *Passion* credits... I think he atoned.

I always thought John would be the first Beatle to die. I just never imagined it would be by firing-squad. I know now that the Sixties without The Beatles were a much harsher and more desolate place than they could have been, musically and otherwise. But even Reagan couldn't kill their influence on rock 'n' roll. He only blacked it out of the public record.

Everyone just wants to forget Reagan, or put him on some pedestal. But what if he'd lived? He was the only Moral Majority member with enough of a criminal mind to get through a full administration without a scandal (or in President Pat's case after Haig, a thrombosis).

Where would we be if Reagan had survived?

In Hell. Sure. But everyone knows that Hell has the greatest tunes.

Reagan would never have brooked Anwar Sadat's own presidential swan song for a second. Imagine what the Middle East would be like without the Peace Accords Sadat co-wrote with Golda Meir before he got shot in '81! I still remember Sadat's big standup-bass voice on the news, "Let us be frank with each other today while the entire world, both East and West, follows these unparalleled moments, which could prove to be a radical turning point in history."

Yup.

Imagine if Saddam Hussein hadn't been deposed by his young sons and their smarmy vizier Hafez Assad. For that matter, imagine if Oday and Qusay Hussein hadn't been fried lungs-first by their own VX-gas when Israel took out Iraq's only excuse for a puke plant with Reagan still warm in his grave. If the

Kurdish Parliament wasn't in power in Iraq now, the US would probably have to send its whole army there just to look after its oil interests. I bet that would go over real big. New and Improved Vietnam, Now With Sand!

No one remembers all that stuff now. Comma. Dammit. But twenty years after Reagan, the What Ifs still horrify and fascinate me.

The bottom truism of life on Earth is that it is nothing but a process of sequential disappointments. On this day of gut-curdling sanctimonies about a false idol, I hope you will bear with my own pontifications long enough to let me get through to you.

Getting all maudlin and hokey about Ronald Reagan and trying to make him into some kind of working-class hero goes against every shred of evidence on the books. The Boomer generation refuses to let the myths of their childhood die a natural death. Consequently, their musically-deprived children will snatch and gobble any remnant of dreams that died before they were born.

Hear me out. John Lennon really fucked things up in a lot of ways, and things are still fucked-up now. But he truly became a force for peace when he shot Reagan. If he hadn't, all evidence suggests a world so much worse I can't even imagine it.

Yeah, I suffered more than most during the seven months of "Culture War" with Patrick Buchanan in the Oval Office after Haig's impeachment trial. But all that had to happen.

Without John Lennon, we'd be having oil-wars instead of mining hydrogen. The entire media in this country would only be owned by a couple of corporations like MCA. And fachrisakesamen, without Haig and Buchanan...

Well, we would have been denied our President Barack Obama, who just allowed me back into the States a week ago Tuesday. About him, at least, I have no room to bitch.

Lester Bangs lives and works with his wife, actress Rebecca Schaefer, in Paris, France, where he was made a *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* in 1999. Look for his forthcoming SF novel *Psychotic Reactions* from Amber Press later this Spring! Lester welcomes all correspondence, which should be addressed to him through the main branch of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency on Luna-One.

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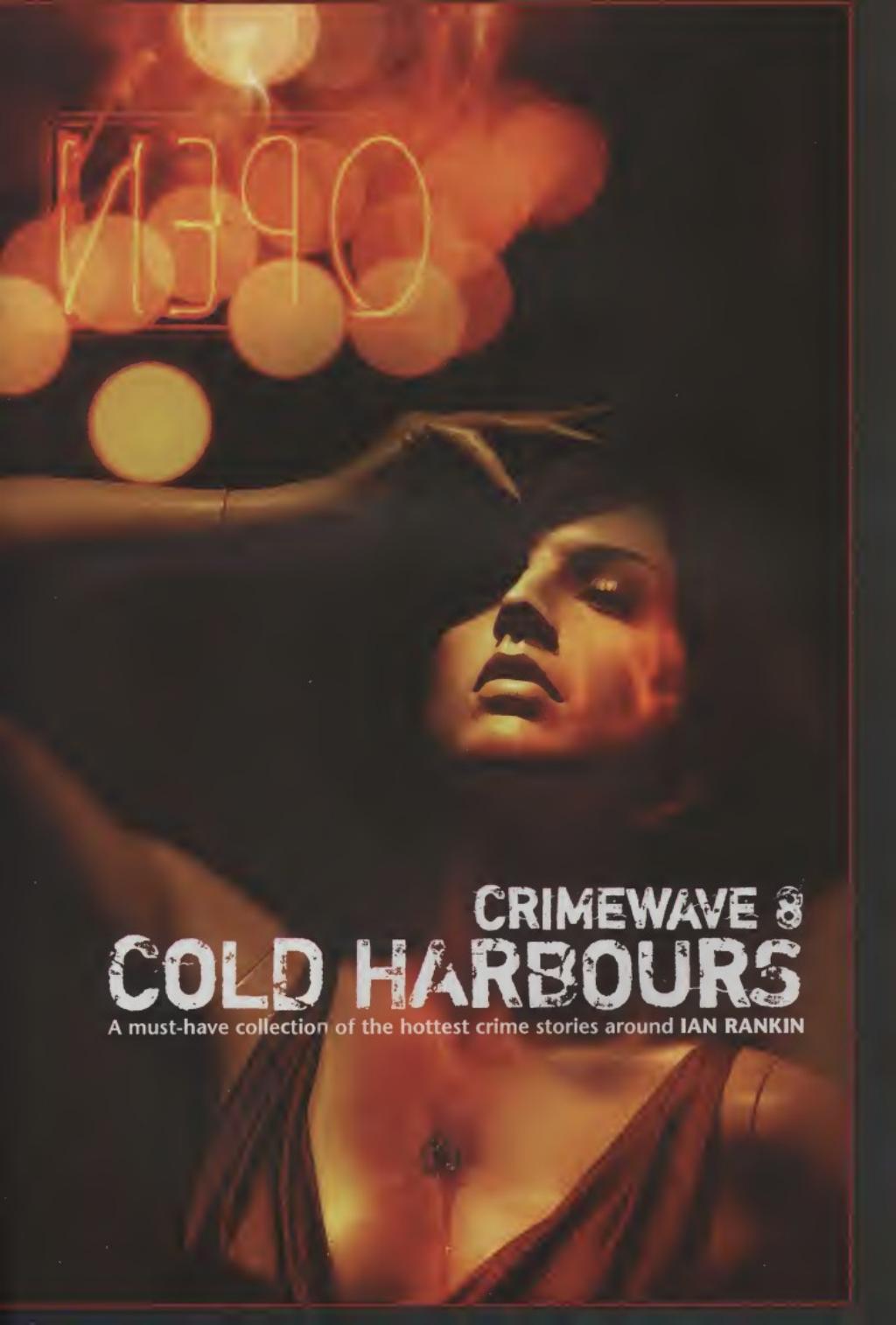
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Few would have believed in the early years of the twenty-first century that the foundational classics of science fiction were being read keenly and closely by mortal powers greater than our own; that across the gulf of continents, entities vast and cool and unsympathetic regarded our wallets with envious eyes, and slowly and surely were drawing their plans against us. But here, with the earthsplattering impact of a bolide falling on Woking, is every studio's marquee fantasy, a Steven Spielberg's **War of the Worlds** no less, and featuring that

Mr Cruise as a Wellsian hero retooled for our time: blue-collarised, dumber by several centiles, and kitted out with a broken family and a ten-year-old sidekick who acts him off the screen and into the disabled toilets.

Like its summer competitor *Batman Begins*, this *War* is a project with a knowing sense of its myth's transformational history. The precedent of the Welles and Pal/Haskin transplants is more than sufficient mandate to relocate, replot, and recharacterise, so long as there are tripods, heat-rays, germs, and a big scary tentacle scene in there

somewhere; though in fact quite a lot of bits and pieces from the novel have survived in some form, if mostly rendered fairly unrecognisable by recombinant plotting and a story that seems to have been pasted together from three or four incompatible drafts. Thus Wells' red weed is for once retained, but is very poorly integrated, with a vague attempt to explain it as an agent of attempted terraforming and some frankly B-movie stuff about it being vampirically nourished by human blood. Like the hero's fairly preposterous tripod sabotage, it ultimately goes nowhere; both weed and invaders are shortly taken out by the traditional Wellsian means, a laudable surprise in its wilful embrace of anticlimax and subversion of Hollywood heroic expectations, but something of a problem for credibility. Wells' famous bacteriological twist ending played plausibly in the context of his carefully set-up Martian ecology; but the Friedman/Koepf script has not only got rid of Mars and indeed any clue about the invaders' (evidently transgalactic) homeworld, but has also equipped them with a million years of forward planning, ordnance-planting, and people-farming, to say nothing of a technology of interstellar teleportation, all the while they've somehow managed to overlook the entire subject of terrestrial microbiology.

Even as a film self-consciously remaking its myth for the age of the war on terror, its messages are more mixed than it intends. "We're the resistance, right?" says Tim Robbins' character. "Occupations always fail." Yet Robbins is shortly outed as a loony; while a yawning pit in the tarmac of the plot is opened up by the peculiarly American fantasy of having the one working car in the state, all because apparently (a) nobody but one halfwitted stevedore has thought of changing the solenoid and (b) our hero doesn't see fit to save hundreds of thousands of lives by passing the word on. In fairness, the particular plot hole here goes arguably all the way down. In a July 7 London bombed momentarily back into the Victorian age, its evening streams of forcibly pedestrianised commuters on the long march home through the empty streets up through Camden Town irresistibly recalling Wells' refugee processions to Edgware, it came thumpingly home that even the novel would have stalled in the second chapter if



NICK LOWE
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Here, with the earthsplattering impact of a bolide falling on Woking, is every studio's marquee fantasy, a Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* no less, and featuring that Mr Cruise as a Wellsian hero retooled for our time: blue-collared, dumber by several centiles, and kitted out with a broken family and a ten-year-old sidekick who acts him off the screen and into the disabled toilets

ALREADY ALREADY HERE



the Wells of 1898, and all the versions made of his work since, had any comprehension of the bicycle (which his narrator claimed initially to be "much occupied with learning to ride," but then spent the rest of the novel forgetting about).

But of course the novel's main narrative challenge for all subsequent adaptations has been its nameless hero's lack of any clear destination, motive, or mission as he stumbles around his apocalyptically transformed Surrey and west London bumping randomly into characters and set pieces. In Wells, this narrative passivity was part of the point, contrasted with the variously doomed and deluded plans of resistance, evasion, or appeasement encountered in the succession of characters along the road. Though the Spielberg version rolls a couple of these together into the interesting but somewhat unfinished Robbins character, the values (and casting) of a large summer movie call inevitably for rather more in the way of heroic endeavour, which Spielberg's writers have tried to supply by bringing the abortive urban-exodus subplot into the main story

and for the first time doing something with Wells' original human ending. At the same time, Wells' class perspective has been partly inverted, with the traditionally professorial hero now a laddish docker – though one who's inexplicably married into (and been divorced out of) Boston posh, and has to witness the ghastliness of his children turning middle-class. Perhaps this makes more sense to Americans, or perhaps it makes even less; but either way, one consequence is that Wells' famous prologue and peroration, the most rewritten passages in all SF, have yet again to be relegated to delivery by a disembodied voiceover (here Morgan Freeman) who has nothing to do with the rest of the film.

Spielberg the showman is undeniably on peak form, with stunning set pieces and some very strong suspense sequences, in a film that regularly pushes beyond the boundaries of entertainment and is at times quite an effort to sit through. Unfortunately,

even the darkest incarnation of Spielberg demands some family-friendly softer emotions in the mix. The iconic and scary, if not terribly Wellsian, 1953 version felt obliged to introduce an onscreen romance plot in accordance with the imperatives of the day, but Hollywood orthodoxy has moved on since; romance is for teen movies, and for anything aspiring to adult emotion there has to be something, however unwelcome, about fatherhood. The one upside is the happy conjunction of the cinema's greatest director of child performers with veteran tot star Dakota Fanning on the cusp of a startling growth spurt in her dramatic range, resulting in a truly extraordinary performance that quite unsettlingly pushes the emotional limit of anything else ever seen from a ten-year-old. Sensing himself hopelessly outclassed, the dour teenage brother huffs off at the first opportunity, to the vast relief of audiences still bombstruck from the spectacle of Sally from *The Cat in the Hat* screaming uncontrollably while being stunt-driven at speed down an obstructed freeway with alien heatrays in pursuit. It's not quite fun, but it's an interesting substitute.

It's depressing to see great festering mats of the same invasive hugweed clogging the cocoa-rich streams of Tim Burton's otherwise pleasingly demented *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In most respects a faithful scene-by-scene translation of the book that doesn't try to make up for its shortage of plot, it nevertheless feels obliged to backstory up on Willy Wonka himself to lumber him with a troubled childhood and a by-the-numbers paternal estrangement that has to be healed in a third-act bolt-on. (Flashback: "No son of mine is going to be a chocolate ear!" Deleted dialogue: "That's chocolatier, Father. It's French." "Silence!") Admittedly this results in a bizarrely Burtonised mutation of the orthodox father/son hug-and-make-up routine in the form of a *Marathon Man* homage with Christopher Lee in the Olivier surgical robes. But the resulting undercutting of melancholy and desperation in Johnny Depp's interpretation of the Wonka character gives the whole film a very different tone from Dahl's playful heartlessness. Dahl's Wonka, for all his dodgy industrial practices displacing local jobs with third-world non-union indentured labour, had no problem at all with the rest of the Buckets mucking in; but Burton's Wonka sees life and art as incompatible ("You can't run a factory with a family hanging over you like an old dead goose"), and has to be painfully re-induced into a world of familial relationships before he can adopt the heir he craves. Some of this, clearly, is the result of the familiar regression to Burtonian archetype of any character inhabited by Depp, and the assimilation of the whole film to a self-portrait on the couch of the filmmaker as tortured scissor-handed gothic weirdo. But some of it is just from the wrong planet.

To escape from the withering ray-strokes of turgid familial heartwarming, you had to duck into the initially unprepossessing **Fantastic Four**. Tim Story's film arrived trailing low expectations, the more so following the pre-emptive strike of the bigger and brighter *Incredibles*. But one of the reasons for the inordinately long gestation of what should have been Marvel's flagship movie franchise is that all the traditional lazy Hollywood solutions bounce off the FF's impermeable forcefield. Unlike Spidey, Hulk, X-Men, Daredevil and Elektra, to say nothing of their older-reader siblings like Blade, the FF team-members are not in the least dark or troubled; they have no sensitive secrets, no identities to protect,



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no external dependent family available for cheap jeopardy plotting and motivational angst; and they hang in a massively cool penthouse superhero lab smack in downtown Manhattan. It's no wonder the screenplay has chewed up writers like a broken copier, with significant replotted and dialogue polishing (either by the uncredited Simon Kinberg, or a later hand still) continuing right through production. As those involved in the development have admitted, a longstanding problem was what to do with Doctor Doom. In the end, a long process of erasure has obliterated all his ambitions other than to eliminate the Fantastic Four, making for a purer and less obstructed storyline, more comicsy and less Hollywood; but he's still the weak link, and the final shot where he's Rosebuddied home in a crate to Latveria makes it unlikely we'll be seeing the vastly more desirable Galactus any time soon in a sequel. More's the shame.

Nevertheless, *Fantastic Four* has somehow managed to defy both expectations and Hollywood orthodoxy to deliver a bright, breezy film with nothing whatever to say about fathers and sons, or indeed anything else much beyond the coolness of superabilities. It's a film with a tooth-breaking critic-proof coating, not even bothering to throw adult reviewers a scrap. Incredibly for an urban SFX movie in 2005, it admits no political resonance at all, unless you count the artful showcase scene where our heroes do a Thunderbirds job on a truckload of NYC firefighters who then mark the foursome's coming-out as superpersons with wild applause. Early plots that had Doctor Doom launching nanobot attacks on the US from rogue state Latveria were jettisoned at the Mark Frost stage of the scripting for a no-fills, back-to-basics storyline that plays truer to the tone of early Lee/Kirby than any of its more earnest predecessors in the Marvel screen stable. At the same time, and perhaps in shrewd recognition that comic-book cinema has passed its peak of cool, it's revised the audience demographic subtly downwards to hit something closer to the age of incoming Marvel readers.

All this is a pretty high-risk combination even without the notoriously unproven director and cast, and it won't be clear for a while whether the gamble's paid off in franchisability – though if the flabby, lachrymose *Spider-Man 2* was a showcase for all the things not to do, then *Fantastic Four* has it pretty much spot-on. Much of the slower relationship stuff in the script hasn't made the cut, including a lot of Ben stuff with Debs and Alicia, while several sequences whose only function was to enable the plot to make sense have been gaily snipped. The crisply-paced result feels twenty minutes shorter than its actual running time, and its three-flight crew of no-nonsense professionals with plenty of experience and refreshingly little baggage get on with the job without luvvying up the mission; Ioan Gruffudd, who seemed like an utterly mad choice on paper for the lead, is more plausible and engaging than anyone could have imagined, and Michael Chiklis' operation of his exocharacter is outstanding for one of those thankless performances where all that's left of the actor is a pair of eyes peeping out. Grown-ups may come out feeling that, while it may not be pompous or portentous, it's not particularly much of anything else either; but my accompanying seven- and nine-year-old ate it up, never once felt scared, bored, or patronised, and laughed like stormdrains at all the gags. *"The Incredibles* was better, though." ■

Ioan Gruffudd is more plausible and engaging than anyone could have imagined



INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS > BOOKS > BIOGRAPHIES > PHILIP K. DICK (AND OTHERS) BY ANDREW HEDGELOCK



I Am Alive and You Are Dead: A Journey
into the Mind of Philip K. Dick

Emmanuel Carrère - Bloomsbury, £17.99 HB

Emmanuel Carrère's biography is a hybrid of literary talking cure and psychological exorcism. He begins his journey into Dickean reality – or should that be realities – with the statement: 'The book you hold in your hands is a very peculiar book.' That's true, Emmanuel, and that's OK; but did you have to make it such a frustrating book?

The style and structure of Carrère's book seems to echo elements of Dick's own chaotic, iconoclastic and, sometimes, exasperating approach to writing – and life. In shunning biographical conventions Carrère sacrifices the authority of the traditional biographer. I can live (easily) with its lack of footnotes and bibliography, but the dearth of quotations from interviews and existing biographies is a disappointment. His total failure to provide anything resembling evidence for his assertions rings alarm bells and the lack of an index is simply infuriating.

The process of getting lost in Dick's obsessions, literary struggles and messy relationships is thoroughly absorbing. Carrère tells the story of a life enriched by a mosaic of passions and fixations – classical music, agoraphobia, drug binges, the FBI, religious revelation, paranoia, women and complex conspiracy theories – and ultimately shattered by them.

Carrère, a critically acclaimed Parisian writer with eight novels and several film scripts under his belt, received the Prix Femina Prize in 1995 for his novel, *La Classe de neige*. His writing in *I Am Alive and You Are Dead* is elegant and accessible but his off-centre approach to structure and point-of-view doesn't come off. Biographies written in the style of novels are fine – even those set out from the subject's point of view – as long as the storytelling doesn't obscure our understanding of the life. There's a degree of immediacy, and Carrère gives us luminous insights into the (possible) workings of Dick's mind: the problem is he fails to place those insights in any kind of social context. We get Dick's side of every event and every argument, but not the gift to see the man – and writer – as others saw him.

The strength, and decisive failure, of the entire biography is recapitulated in the segment that links the meaningless co-incidence – or

Jungian synchronicity – of the burglary of Carrère's home while he wrote about the burglary of Dick's. This is a crucial event: the point at which Philip Dick's world turned totally 'Phildickian'; the point at which Dick's psyche thrashes – inventing abstruse metaphysical conspiracies – to impose psychological order on an utterly chaotic world. The problem was that when I wanted to link it to Dick's later work and further descent into madness, I couldn't find it. As I said, the lack of an index is infuriating.

Carrère's quest is to illuminate the psychic landscape and turbulent life underpinning the creation of SF masterpieces such as *The Man in the High Castle*, the *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. It is essential reading for 'Dickheads', but, for the rest of us, a confusing and irksome mishmash of fragmented events. Paradoxically, a biography of this strange, complex and damaged writer would have made more sense delivered in the style of nearly anyone but

Philip K. Dick. *

Andrew Hedgecock

5 other masters of literary paranoia

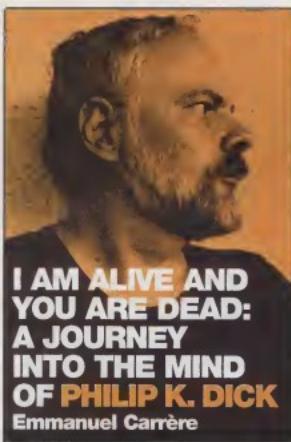
1. Will Self
2. J.G. Ballard
3. Thomas Pynchon
4. Iain Sinclair
5. William Burroughs

Other writers whose lives and work were deeply affected by religious mania include:

- 18th century poet Christopher Smart, who praised God for the many wonderful aspects of his cat Jeoffry, and prayed so obsessively he was committed to an asylum
- Christina Rossetti, whose devotion to the Anglican Church was indoctrinated by Tractarian preachers and resulted in an adolescent breakdown

'The beauty of religious mania is that it has the power to explain everything...logic can be happily tossed out the window'

— Stephen King



**book review and all sidebars
by Andrew Hedgecock**

10 other writers who experienced turbulent mental health:

1. William Styron
2. Thomas Wolfe
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald
4. Louisa May Alcott
5. Honore de Balzac
6. Virginia Woolf
7. Sylvia Plath
8. James Joyce
9. Ernest Hemingway
10. Patricia Cornwell

Michael Moorcock's view of Dick: sceptic; psychedelic fellow-traveller

Dick's work was in some ways the culmination of the sceptical side of the SF genre from the fifties to the seventies; one which has largely disappeared now.

With the likes of Alfred Bester, Pohl and Kornbluth, Robert Sheckley and other contributors to *Galaxy* magazine, especially in the sixties, he created nothing less than a model for the present as we are experiencing it.

While he was never really part of the psychedelic scene which made him one of its great heroes, he nonetheless captured certain elements of that sensibility which began to question the nature of perception as well as the nature of fiction itself and gave birth to the narrative forms we now call post-modernist.

All best, Mike

Another form of Dickian obsession...

Mr Pink: All the time, morning, day, night, afternoon, dick, dick.

Mr Blue: How many dicks was that?

Mr White: A lot.

Some 'serious dick action' from *Reservoir Dogs*

15 other writers who couldn't keep away from the pharmaceutical cabinet

1. Balzac (cannabis and vast quantities of caffeine)
2. Bowles (peyote, mescaline, acid)
3. Burroughs (peyote, mescaline, acid)
4. Byron (opium)
5. Coleridge (cannabis and opium)
6. de Quincey (opium)
7. Guy de Maupassant (anesthetics)
8. William James (anesthetics)
9. Keats (opium)
10. Kerouac (benzodiazepines and cannabis)
11. Proust (anesthetics)
12. Rimbaud (cannabis)
13. Shelley (opium)
14. Thompson, Hunter S. (peyote, mescaline, acid)
15. Yeats (cannabis)

INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS • BOOKS • JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES

Thud!

Terry Pratchett • HarperCollins, \$24.95 HB

Looking For Jake, and Other Stories

China Miéville • Del Rey, \$14.95 PB

Two hundred *Interzones* ago we had never heard of the man, unless we'd happened to discover *The Carpet People* (1971) or *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976) or *Strata* (1981), all published in minute hardback editions by a minute and estimable firm named after its founder, Coline Smythe, who remains a friend and colleague of Terry Pratchett. Most of us did not discover these only moderately extraordinary apprentice works. And only the uncannily prescient of the few who read them (I think in fact there were none) could have guessed that *Strata* – a flat world constructed by Builder Gods, ploughing through space in a *direction* – was a kind of dress rehearsal for the Discworld series. (This is all the more evident, now that **Thud!** has appeared.) In 1982, *Interzone* appeared, and began to ride the wave of time, not really having much choice in the matter; in 1983, Discworld appeared, and began to ride the wave of time, in a *direction*. Time may fit everything in the end, like Procrustes; but while we are alive we live in the conviction that the issues of a magazine and the issues of a mind march to different drummers. Until we hit the grass, let it be so.

And so it is good – even if in the end it is as meaningless as Procrustes – to be able to write in the 200th *Interzone* of the 30th (or so) Discworld novel, and to speak of a tale whose implications were first adumbrated by the author of *Strata* at almost exactly the same time we lot were adumbrating the pages of a journal. Over this quarter of a century, the Discworld series has evolved, fissiparated, hardened, softened, returned to its prime, aged, grown young, gone walkabout, headed in a *direction*. **Thud!** is one of the novels of *direction*. Like most of those mostly

recent Discworld books which edge gingerly into history, into something like an Industrial Revolution, into a world geared to the passages of Time, **Thud!** features Commander Sam Grimes of the City Watch, who is allergic to Magic, who thinks Story is a kind of lie unless it is answerable to Law, who is intricate with the Discworld he was born into, but who (like his Realpolitik-driven master Lord Vetinari) may ultimately be instrumental in bringing his land into Time, into history; who may ultimately help pilot the flat world to its final destination. Increasingly, there does seem to be an end in view – over and above Pratchett's own inevitable mortality (he is one of highly successful 1948 models, like William Gibson, and Rob Holdstock, and Brian Stableford and Dan Simmons and George R.R. Martin, and lots more; they will all be 60 soon enough). As to the nature of that end, I'd be very surprised if I were the only Discworld reader to think that the planet increasingly resembles a generation starship. That the world is heading somewhere, in a *direction*. That maybe the journey is coming to a climax. That maybe Time will soon be opening doors – portals, portholes – into a new world.

Thud!, which intensifies some material first found in *The Sixth Elephant* (1999), ploughs very straightforwardly into dangerous ground. The title has at least two main meanings: it is the sound made by a 'heavy club' which has been used by a dwarf or dwarfs to murder another dwarf deep in the dwarf tunnels that – we now realize – undermine Ankh-Morpork, making it instantly more edificial, more deeply riven by shadow, more like a fantasy London; and it is a game played between dwarfs and trolls. From the event signalized by the fatal **thud!** evolves a mounting confrontation between the trolls, one of whom has been accused of the murder, and the dwarfs; this confrontation threatens to replay the aeons-old troll-dwarf battle of Koom Valley, a conflagration ignited by the treachery of a troll (or of a dwarf). Though the dominant 'deep-downer' dwarfs – with their fundamentalist diktats and their tendency to excommunicate any dwarf who is too sane to obey these diktats,



Pratchett
at 200...

JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES

many of which are directly oppressive of female dwarfs, and their conviction that surface dwellers, which is to say non-believers, are bad dreams – closely resemble certain kinds of Orthodox Jew, it is pretty clear that, at least for the purposes of *Thud!*, we are intended to think that they also invoke the fundamentalist clerics of Islam. Just as we are intended to draw comparisons between the annual Koom Valley parades, during which trolls and dwarfs clash and kill each, and the appalling behaviour of the Christians of Ulster. In the end, *Thud!* expresses a more or less zero rapport with the ministry of any of these vast choking sects. It is, at base, an exceedingly angry, spittle-intolerant book.

The second meaning of *Thud!* – that it designates a game – governs the climax of the book, which is a joy to reach. And there are joys throughout, as always in a Pratchett novel, bad puns, hilarious stupidities, characters who are too stupid to stop being themselves, etc., etc. Outright jokes are less frequent, though, perhaps because Pratchett has invested too much of his creative energies this time round in characters who are too intelligent to repeat themselves like burps. The array of exceedingly sharp men and women populating this book is maybe more extensive than in any previous Discworld volume; certainly *Thud!* has more more characters one might wish to sit down to dinner with than almost any novel I can think of. One wishes to eat with them because they are smart, and canny; but also because they are conspicuously on the side of the author, who writes as though he feels he's going to need all the help he can get (all the characters he can create) to fully explore the Discworld that has (in the mind's eye) always been there to be found, who feels he is going to need pilot after pilot after pilot in order to guide the Discworld safely into dock, at the end of things.

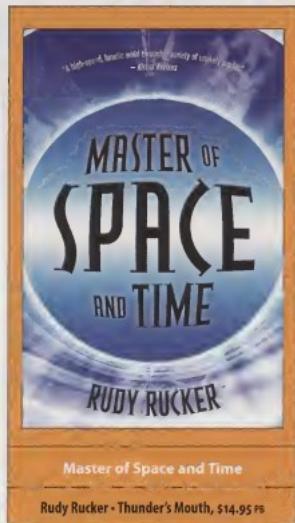
...and a Wedge of China

China Miéville has organized *Looking for Jake*, which is his first collection of stories, with exceeding care. Themes and adumbrations echo each other, sometimes subliminally, sometimes pretty clearly; chthonic phrasings of the world out of mid-period M. John Harrison expose themselves vast as empires and more slow, especially in the early work here republished, then subside; there can be detected through the succession of tales a gradual freeing of the author from the Harrisonian *turn* (it is a turn Harrison himself has shaken loose of in more recent work): this turn being an absolutely felt but unspoken assumption that the world inherently resists telling, that the world *coagulates against* any effort to make it into story, that any character's attempt to obey his own story will alert the world's immune system. In reality, of course, this is just another story (one that both Harrison and Miéville have increasingly knighted-moved themselves beyond). It is the story that the world is to baulk.

And there is a related pattern, which the book also gives us a view on. I'm inclined to call it the Motif of Harmful Sensation, after the very fine Wikipedia entry for the term (like all Wikipedia material, some of it screwloose, some of it brilliant, this entry is anonymous; I'd love to know who wrote it, so I can acknowledge him or her in any future encyclopedia I'm involved in, as this Motif will appear in any of them). The Motif is essentially self-explanatory – like Tolkien's Ring, or Medusa's gaze, or Borges's Aleph, or the Book it is death to read, the Motif points to any transaction of experience which is inherently harmful. The Motif appears frequently in Miéville – most notably in 'Entry Taken from a Medical Encyclopedia' (2003) and 'Details' (2002), which are here reprinted side by

side – and demonstrates, I think, through the naturalness and inveteracy of its recurrence, that he is as fond a 'horror' writer, a writer most comfortable in what I've begun to call the Bound Fantastic, to distinguish it from the Free-Fantastic story shapes common to fantasy. In Miéville, there is a deep-structured inclination (powerfully and sometimes potently odd in a man who can work cognition stuff like a master) to treat decipherment and bondage as indissolubly linked; in Miéville, it is very dangerous to perceive the world, because when you perceive the world the world perceives you.

All of this is carefully locked into place in *Looking for Jake*, which is the up side. The down side is that the tales that most clearly articulate these grammars – most notably the sorry title story (1998) – are Miéville's weakest. (His weaker stories are all, maybe not incidentally, couched in the first person singular; it is of course the narrative voice most likely to find difficulties in things.) So in a sense there is all too much of *Looking for Jake*, which is an all too learned book. Mostly in the later tales – like the two Motif tales mentioned above, in the superb 'Reports of Certain Events in London' (2004), and in 'The Tain' (2002), a PS Publishing novella here put into the context of other short work – Miéville leaps whole and free out of the entropy matrix, and commandeers us to watch. I won't touch on 'The Tain' here (it has been amply reviewed); but the abyssal London it reveals is what Miéville most effectively inhabits. In the early stories, he addresses that London in despair and gouache. In the later tales, he takes us there, into the Cauldron. Where he makes us feel he is telling us our home. It is good to get there, at the end of *Jake*. *

**Master of Space and Time****Rudy Rucker • Thunder's Mouth, \$14.95 pb**

If a quick glance down the page of chapter titles – with examples such as 'God Goes Trans-Sex', 'Porkchop Bushes and Fritter Trees', 'Rudy Rucker is Watching You', and 'Sit on My Butt' – is insufficient to suggest to the reader that what he holds in his hands is a novel of humour, energy, originality and sheer mania, then an impression is sure to have formed by the close of chapter two, if not sooner. *Master of Space and Time* is sheer class. What this reader holds in his hands is a reissue (and on a presentation level, a greatly improved product) of the 1984 original, from a favourite author, and a book which proves again that Rucker is both in a class of his own, and is a law unto himself.

We meet what seems to be a favourite Rucker protagonist: a humble working man, associated with science and scientists, and slightly down on his luck. His name is Joseph Fletcher. In a breakneck, hell-for-leather pace, we follow Fletcher as he becomes involved with alternative versions of a friend of his ('I took the thumb-sized Harry off my steering wheel and set him down on the dashboard. The smaller Harrys moved right along with him'); with a version of Godzilla; with a world of cranky people, crankier robots, and a world in which wishes exist and can be used as a form of currency. It is epileptic stuff. The book is a series of convulsive and beautiful spasms. (The relationship between Fletcher and his young daughter is particularly sweet, in the right way.) While there might be little variation in the tone of Rucker's novel (and certainly none in the velocity), there is an obvious punch in the flitting between worlds – or existences – of varying hues and subjects. We watch (in admiration) as Rucker riffs on

Carroll's Alice, on the real reason for the Big Bang, on Orwell, on deluges of fish, on tech and sex and God and religion ("I bet you don't know what the Cosmos looks like," taunted Harry)...and on the power – if used well or misused – of wishes. Rucker does not so much change gears as change cars: a new state-of-the-art for every chapter. And pace some other critics and reviewers (pace Clute), Rucker has as much to do, if more, with the Golden Age of the hardboiled detective novel (Chandler, Hammett) as he does with the cyberpunk fraternity or the Golden Age of SF.

The title of this novel is not ironic. Sarcastic, perhaps; but not ironic. *Master of Space and Time* is an exploration of the Big Questions, and Rucker is adept at convincing a scientific duncing of the reality of gluons, which begin this adventure, as well as the possibility of a higher (not emotional, but scientific) power driving all fictions. Who is really in charge of this narrative? Rucker? The version of Rucker who is driving the Rucker who appears briefly in the sunset of the text? It is exhilarating, challenging to ponder on such notions.

"Was the nightmare ever going to end?" the Ruck-Fletch symbiosis noodles, about halfway through the stretch. Part of the joy of this novel is settled in the knowledge that however egregious events become for the main players, we still regard the enterprise as a fairy tale, a joke. It is witty and it is full of itself. It is unconditionally recommended. *

Glass Soup**Jonathan Carroll • Tor, \$24.95 hb**

When I was twelve, an alcoholic teacher named Tite (by name and by nature, as the joke at the time ran) invited the class – a class of Religious Education – to draw God. To sketch our impressions of God...Partly because I didn't know how to draw much else, I drew God as a businessman, in a blue suit and a tidy, '80s beard; but I wish I'd had Jonathan Carroll's notion of God, as revealed in *Glass Soup*. Why not? God's a polar bear. Sure.

If there has been a doctoral thesis or even a magazine article, or (and this would be fitting) a painting entitled 'The Dog in the works of Jonathan Carroll', your reviewer hasn't seen it; but it would seem, twenty-odd years down the line, and with *Glass Soup* being Carroll's fifteenth major publishing project, to be a ripe subject. Dogs feature heavily in Carroll-Land. Dogs can speak. Characters are even referred to as dogs. ('Brox was the size of a small dog now' – *Glass Soup*). But another major theme of the author's work, particularly in the second half of his career, is the linguistic reversal of D-O-G. Carroll has God on his mind, and he wants us to know it. In the author's 'Uh-Oh City', for example, a

character learns that he is in fact one-thirty-second part of God, and (if you don't know already) it's as easy to buy into what Carroll has to offer as it is to buy groceries. The man's a genius. You might not like what he has to say (Carroll's previous novel, *White Apples*, was a major disappointment for me; and I was at first underwhelmed to learn that that novel's protagonists would be back for *Glass Soup* – a wholly unfounded reservation, as it turned out); and he might make you angry, laugh or cry. But there is little chance that you simply won't believe him.

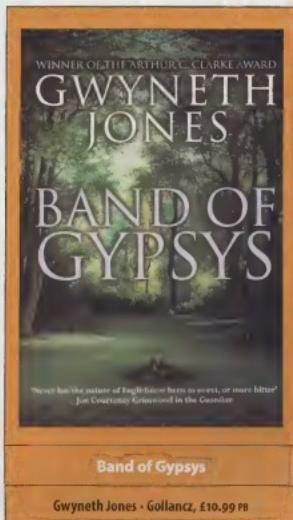
But back to God. A polar bear, then. Sure. Because, you see, that's OK...in a *Glass Soup* world in which an octopus can drive a bus full of cartoon characters (in the beautifully titled Prologue, 'Simon's House of Lipstick'); and in which a (comparatively) mundane activity such as the inappropriate disposal of a pizza box can set 'two mates...laughing like loons at the total Dada awesomeness of what they had just done'. (If I might make a prediction, I would guess that the phrase 'Dada awesomeness' will be used to illustrate at least one Carroll interview in the future. And while I might sigh at that journalist's laziness, I wouldn't blame anyone for the shorthand: it really does sum up Carroll very well.) But the central theme of *Glass Soup* is death.

There can't be many people who have no clue whatever about the work of Jonathan Carroll; but just in case, here might be what the author puts on his writing resume. The language is always, here included, beautiful. Flip it open at random – in fact flip the oeuvre open at random – and you'll find a stunning phrase. Quite often an alternative world is revealed very slowly, but in *Glass Soup* the weirdness sidles right up and says howdy. You have characters pondering their places in the world via sudden shocks, and here – in the bracket of Carroll's best work which would also include *The Land of Laughs* and *From the Teeth of Angels* – you burgle your way through a character's worst ruminations on death.

God is a bear, a belly button is a death-line, and death is like school. And while it is bad form for a reviewer to refer too much to himself, it is pointless to pretend that novels are read in an emotional vacuum. It just so happens that death and its aftermath is much on your reviewer's mind right now; as a consequence, perhaps, I found this novel less amusing than some of Carroll's other outings and tear-shakily moving. It is a remarkable return to form, and I would urge you to get your hands on a copy. Read it on the bus and look up, blinking in surprise, to see that your driver is a still a human being. Read it on your honeymoon. Read it in court. Read it in the bath. But read it.

Now I'm off to copyright 'Dada Awesomeness' for future use. *

David Mathew

**Band of Gypsies**

Gwyneth Jones • Gollancz, £10.99 PB

Band of Gypsies is the fourth volume of Gwyneth Jones' counter-cultural reworking of the Arthurian stories, a rock *Matter of Britain*. And once again the reader is enrolled as part of the crazy retinue of rock and roll king Ax Preston and his twin consorts Sage Pender and Fiorinda Slater, as they continue their quest to bring some sort of peace and order to a kingdom that has become seriously disunited as a result of economic depression, environmental disaster and the activities of deep-green anti-globalisation activists. Most recently, the world's fossil-fuel reserves have been destroyed in a blast of psychic energy generated by the A-team, and elements of the UK's government is now wondering whether the Zen Self experiments might yield their very own Neurobomb, in the shape of Sage Pender, while the Wiccan grouping, currently in the ascendant, is taking its turn at going after the lords and ladies of rock and roll.

I hesitate to say that this seems to be familiar territory, but initially it is difficult to avoid that conclusion. The names and faces may change, the party attempting to seize power may be different, as may be the manner in which they impose their will on the masses, the manner in which one of the golden three will suffer before being rescued may vary, but the basic plot has been transferred from one book to the next almost intact. We have to assume this is a deliberate artistic decision. Jones being far too intelligent a writer to simply settle for repeating an attractive formula – though there is no denying that Ax, Sage and Fiorinda are a very attractive group of people.

If the reader looks on the series not only as an exercise in counter cultural 'what if', in

which the 'lunatics' have taken over the asylum and made it work in so far as anyone can make it work, but also as a return to the literary style of the original *Matter of Britain*, certain stylistic issues become less problematic and make a lot more sense: the absence of ordinary people and their suffering during the Dissolution and beyond is a prime example. Medieval romances rarely featured peasants because they were almost invisible to the noble audience. Likewise, the way in which time passes in fits and starts, with important events brought to the fore, tedious daily life left behind; the vagueness of the geography, the occasional extreme violence, and perhaps most important in these terms, the 'courtly' set-pieces, in this instance the concert performances. To use the trappings of medieval romance like this is to signal that these novels are operating in a region more liminal than perhaps a more traditional science fiction novel would offer. Jones is able to experiment with the possibilities of a counter cultural revolution in ways that modern fictional structures might not easily allow. Thus we are in a situation where the Rock and Roll Reich might just happen, rather than one in which we are shown a hundred and one ways that it never could. ■

Maureen Kincaid Speller**Déjà Vu**

Ian Hocking - UKA Press, £9.99 PB

Ian Hocking's debut novel from a non-genre small press has attracted a fair amount of critical attention. It is a nearish-future thriller set twenty years hence with a pretty good hook. Saskia Brandt is an agent with the European FIB. Dragged back from holiday for an important case she returns to office to find her secretary has been stabbed to death and stuffed into the fridge. The crime has been committed in such a way as to frame her but as Brandt races to solve the murder before internal affairs become involved she realises that maybe she is more implicated than she thought. At the same time there's still her original case, involving Professor David Proctor. On the other side of the Channel, and in the other narrative thread, Proctor is drawn back to the secret government lab in West Lothian where his wife was killed in an unsolved terrorist act.

Unfortunately as a thriller it falls flat. After the promising set-up we move into a long, flaccid section that makes up the bulk of the book. This only exists to bring Proctor and Brandt together; it adds nothing but only serves to bring out Hocking's weaknesses as a novelist. Primarily this is the fact that all his characters speak with the same voice. The book accelerates for a rushed and confusing ending. And if it doesn't work as a thriller, it doesn't work as SF either. By the end Hocking has introduced three major SF tropes, which

is decidedly over ambitious since he never gets round to fully exploring any of them.

There are a lot of little niggles throughout – why would law enforcement officers carry revolvers, obsolete even now? Would a sergeant in the British Army really introduce herself to a civilian as 'Caroline'? – but more than this there is a general lack of plausibility in the underlying plot. It is a book where you have to wait till the very final pages to discover the meaning of what has happened. Once you arrive, though, the answer isn't very satisfying. ■

Martin Lewis**Old Twentieth**

Joe Haldeman • Ace, \$24.95 HB

There are plenty of SF works equating virtual reality with nostalgia and an escape from the challenges of the real – probably the finest is Christopher Priest's *A Dream of Wessex*. *Old Twentieth* is another and, like many of Joe Haldeman's novels, it uses SF tools to examine history, especially the wars that punctuated the last American century.

The novel begins with a series of slick info-dumps in the mid-21st century, an immortality drug is discovered, as is an inhabitable extra-solar system, Beta Hydri. Five ships set out on a thousand-year voyage to the system, and to keep the crew entertained, they have a virtual-reality simulation of 20th century Earth. All seems well, until glitches start appearing in the simulation – tellingly, one of the first is the loss of the stink of early-century New York – and then participants begin dying of heart attacks or strokes.

The novel is narrated by Jacob Brewer, a VR engineer aboard the ship. Interspersed with the story of his investigations are his descriptions of experiencing the simulation, beginning with Gallipoli in 1915. (A crucial confrontation, characteristically for Haldeman, takes place in Vietnam during the crux year of 1968.) The book is dialogue-heavy, skilful with its exposition, and an extremely swift read; and Haldeman clearly loves talking about the bits of history he's chosen. In the end, the mystery is closed out in an elegant if hardly innovative way. If there's a problem with *Old Twentieth*, it's with what it omits. The last simulation we see is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Since then, to put it mildly, a bit has happened. One can only assume from the nostalgicists' refusal to look beyond 2000 that, for all the horrors of the twentieth century, where we're living now is even more difficult for them to make sense of. *Old Twentieth* has a nice ambiguity about whether it's punishing its characters for staying too long in the warm bath of nostalgia, or explaining why they might cling to a comprehensible (if at times terrible) story of a closed century. Looking at the news, or out of the window in 2005, you can understand why. ■

Graham Sleight

Divided Kingdom

Rupert Thomson • Bloomsbury, £17.99 HB

Magic or Madness

Justine Larbalastier • Sleuth Razorbill, \$16.99 PB

Mélusine

Sarah Monette • Ace, \$24.95 HB

There is a very distinct difference between fable and fantasy, speculation and speculative fiction. Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* narrates a fable of Britain: the government has turned to older models of human behaviour – the classical humours – to reclassify the citizenry and to divide them into four nations within nations, giving to each a landscape and an economy that suits the local temperament, so that the choleric end up in north west the yellow spaces on the map, areas damp and mountainous. The phlegmatics land is coloured blue, for the water with which they are considered to live in affinity and their land contains the spiritual spaces of Cornwall and Wales.

Our hero, Thomas, is taken from his home at the age of nine, re-educated, renamed and assigned to a family in the sanguine quarter. Thomson proceeds to tell the story in the voice of someone who is both a traumatised child and defined by his acceptance of the world around him. It is a difficult task to pull off and Thomson doesn't always succeed. As Thomas becomes disillusioned with his life as a civil servant, his despair is expressed on the same prolonged note. It gives an air of unreality to the whole business. This is appropriate.

Thomson's world doesn't work in any real fashion and is not supposed to. The division of the kingdoms leaves some areas to rot in disarray, others to function rather well. There is no logic to the assignments. The apparent absence of the rest of the world is underscored by an absence in the frontispiece – the Republic of Ireland has disappeared leaving choleric Ulster alone in the Irish sea. This 'thought' experiment has been set up to consider the arbitrariness of government, not the arbitrariness of prejudice. Its nebulously metaphorizes the condition of the state. If Thomson has a point to make, it is about the insularity of the human condition. He is interested less in politics, than in the inner self. Thomas' physical trajectory is from the central landscape of divided London to the coast and back, and as he journeys back to the heartland he seals himself off from the macrocosmic world to return with relief to the microcosm of 'character' and 'relationships'.

In *Magic or Madness* by Justine Larbalastier, the absence of story seems less deliberate. Larbalastier is a talented writer: both New York and Sydney are depicted vividly, and her three main characters (Tom, Reason and Jay-Tee) are attractive, but the entire novel is an introduction to something more interesting. Reason, left behind after her mother goes insane, is sent back to her grandmother whom she half-knows to be a witch, where she discovers magic is real and those who are magic either die of its use, prey on others for strength and life, or refuse to use it and go mad. Unfortunately all of this is made clear to the reader – if not to Reason – rather early, and it isn't hard to know who the good guys and bad guys are either. Where Thomson was all metaphor this is a *wyswyg* novel.

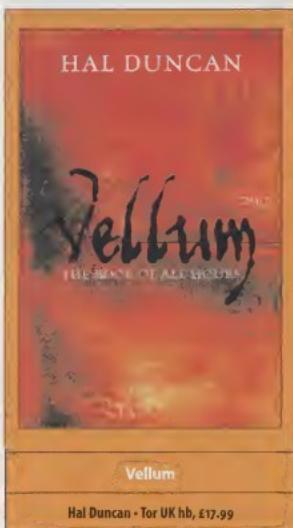
The current dreariness of the fantasy shelves is in part a generic thing. Sometime around 1975 quest fantasies swept the adult shelves clean of almost every other form of fantasy, and although the likes of Jonathan Carroll, M. John Harrison, Elizabeth Hand, Michael Swanwick and (lately) China Miéville peek through the iron bars of eland, for those of us whose earliest fantasy memories were Fritz Leiber's landscapes have been rather deserted. Just as I had reached the point of saying 'no genre fantasy please' I received Sarah Monette's *Mélusine*. With the exception of one paragraph which should be sliced out with a razor blade (you'll know it when you reach it) the book is elegant, joyously written and a break from the current fashion for the baroque.

Felix Harrway, magician of the court, sees his life unravel when someone finds out he was once child prostitute. Mildmay the Fox, once a kept-thief, now a cat burglar, is caught up in the hunt for heretics after Felix destroys the Virtu of the city state of Mélusine. When the wizard Mavortian seeks out Felix to help him on a private quest, he accidentally captures Mildmay as well, and Mildmay finds himself nursing the sick and insane. Felix on a journey about which he knows little and which increasingly becomes irrelevant to Felix's needs.

Felix and Mildmay take their place alongside Fafrid and the Grey Mouser as intriguing, witty, sometimes vicious travelling companions, but they are not mere homage. Monette's world is far more complex than Leiber's. This is grown-up romance, where one can love knowing it not too wise; where many sexualities exist and contribute to the maelstrom of blackmail, deceit and power politics. The city of Mélusine is governed by the wise and well intentioned who have little idea how politics trickles down and the poisons it acquires on the way, and the individuals who act within it are petty-malicious, not grand-evil. What finally lifts *Mélusine* above the average however is the sheer quality of Monette's construction.

Mélusine is written from two first person points of view. The effect is a little like a radio play, and each voice is crisply distinct. It would have been easy for Monette to apply dialect as a colour code on a map, but in Midmay and Felix she has created people whose syntax is shaped by experience, by different kinds of wariness, different kinds of distrust. The result is an exquisitely painful romp, a return to an old kind of fantasy with a gleaming new edge. ■

Farah Mendlesohn



Hal Duncan • Tor UK hb, £17.99

The title of *Vellum* is probably the simplest, most straightforward aspect of the entire book. Once you get past the title and into the book proper all Hell breaks loose. Well, not quite loose; Hell's more, well, gathering its forces for an attack really. But at least there's some badass angels on hand to face-off the assault.

It's 2017 and Heaven is as vicious as Hell, with black ops sleeper angels, ready to rape and murder for the cause. They used to be humans, but they've been changed by contact with an ancient language – the Cant – which they use to rewrite reality. These angels form a divine press-gang, travelling through the Vellum, the fabric of reality, tracking down god-like creatures to force them to join the war, preferably on the side of Heaven. The plot revolves around Finnian, a draft-dodging Irish rebel angel, and a trailer-trash tomboy called Phreedom, as they run from both sides of the war, taking refuge in the folds of the Vellum.

We've become inured to linear storytelling over the years. Hal Duncan discards that approach completely – well, it's more he screws

it up and throws it on the floor. Duncan's own approach exhibits China Miéville's richness of language and takes one step beyond Jon Courtenay Grimwood's time slicing story structure style.

The effect is, at first, very disorientating. Every couple of pages, the story swaps from one thread to another and it rarely picks up from where it left off. Rather, it picks up at another time in history for the same character but when they were actually someone else.

There comes a stage when your brain must either explode with trying to keep track of it all, or let go of all concepts of rectilinear propagation, throw all the facts on a mound in the back of the brain and hope that one or two will connect eventually. And connect they do, though probably at a more subconscious level than most stories. Be patient – a section may not seem relevant but one well placed sentence will reveal a useful piece of the puzzle.

Another aspect of Duncan's writing that delights is the sheer depth of mythological references scattered throughout *Vellum*. There are stories influenced by Sumerian epic, Greek gods, English epic poetry and Bible stories. All are incorporated, filtered through the writer's imagination and laid out on the page with subtle transformations that make them relevant to the tale in hand.

The weakest aspect of the book is the overall plot – it suffers from being squeezed into the gaps between the luscious language, fractured structure and far-reaching references to ancient lore. But this may be a conscious move not to overload the reader and it doesn't stop *Vellum* being a remarkably ambitious debut novel. For lovers of innovative fantasy, it's a must-read; if you're after a safe, regurgitated Quest, then move along, there's nothing to see here. ■

Sandy Auden

Sunstorm

Arthur C. Clarke & Stephen Baxter • Gollancz, £12.99 PB

Sunstorm is the second book of 'A Time Odyssey', and is the sequel to *Time's Eye*. With the infilling supplied in the text, *Sunstorm* can be read without reference to the earlier novel. However, a far larger design is clearly in the authors' minds, and is slowly and mysteriously emerging. The gigantic vistas of time and space that both authors have made their own are wondrously invoked, and are waiting. The alarms are going off.

One character is carried over: Bisesa Dutt, whose return to her family in London occurs on 9 June 2037. This is the same day that a solar outburst takes place. There is an ejection of matter and radiation from the sun on a scale unprecedented in its size and effect on all aspects of human life and the Earth. When

it is discovered that this is only going to be the prelude to a far more devastating outburst predicted for less than five years in the future, the novel's cast of scientists, spacepersons, politicians and AIs all start to plan how to survive something that will wipe out all life on the planet. The solution falls into the category of the bleeding obvious – and, as this is Clarke and Baxter, also the bleeding gigantic...

Sunstorm is in the slimmed-down manner of Clarke's own (particularly later) novels – it almost reads like a synopsis in places, and the characters, despite a few personalising touches, are clearly there to allow the outcome to be achieved, and the background movements to be sketched in and hinted at. They are certainly only the means to the epic end. This contrasts with Baxter's solo work, in which his characters get up to their elbows in the mess, and often get it on their faces too. But both authors sing from the same ephemeris table. They complement each other perfectly. We get the lean all passion spent Clarke and the expansive Baxter, all in one package. And it is a refreshing one, even if over-optimistic about human nature in places, and despite the colossal destruction and disruption that is still supplied, in the finest disaster-SF mode.

With the novel ending with the triumphing of science and the human spirit, the hints as to who or what, and why, everything that has happened in the first two books actually did happen, is set to be further explored and expanded upon. It promises to be a typically Clarkean (and Baxterian) long march. ■

John Howard

Who Needs Cleopatra?

Steve Redwood • Reverb, £7.99 PB

Having lampooned first and last things in the mock-Miltonian *Fisher of Devils*, for his next trick Redwood turns his comic capabilities loose on the chronological conundrums of SF's time travel subgenre. And a case can be made for regarding *Cleopatra* itself as something of a time capsule, within the walls and paragraphs of which SF aficionados of the far future will find echoes and reverberations of some of the most significant contemporary works in the field. In his afterward Redwood acknowledges Moorcock's *Behold the Man* as his initial inspiration, but debts, known or not, are also owed to Anderson's stories of the *Time Patrol*, Leiber's *The Big Time*, Heinlein's *By His Bootstraps* and, perhaps most significantly, Ballard's *The Greatest Television Show on Earth* and Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*.

Redwood's hero, named only as N, is known to the future as the Unreliable Narrator, and with good reason as he tries to reinvent every

situation to show himself in a favourable light and imparts his wisdom on female psychology, which in many ways is the most fantastic aspect of the novel, culminating in an ending that is pure wish-fulfilment. The inventor of a time machine, N can only finance his escapades into the past by throwing in his lot with a media mogul who seizes on the opportunity for the ultimate pay-per-view. With the mogul's son Bertie as his sidekick, N sets out to solve some of history's most enduring mysteries, such as who the Mona Lisa was, where Cain's wife came from, how Joseph Smith got the *Book of Mormon*, why Rasputin was so difficult to kill, the truth about the Roswell aliens and what really happened at the Crucifixion, though unfortunately he never gets to fulfil his heart's desire with a trip back to visit uberbabe Cleopatra. Something like the first two thirds of the book are taken up with N recounting these adventures to Shimmer, Shade and Shalom, ostensibly officers of the Time Police intent on keeping their records up to date like all good bureaucrats, but in reality agents of a future power with a nefarious agenda of its own, one involving the disappearance of Bertie, the secret of time travel, the war between the sexes and an event referred to simply as 'The Uncluttering'.

From a Science Fiction perspective this book has little new to offer, as readers may already have surmised from my earlier name dropping. But what it lacks in conceptual breakthrough, *Who Needs Cleopatra?* more than makes up for in sheer entertainment value and authorial chutzpah. Redwood is clearly having a ball here, giving us a series of intriguing time riddles, with special attention paid to the complexities and paradoxes attendant on the use of this particular McGuffin; while his plot literally ties itself up in knots at times, you always have the feeling that the author is in charge of his material and knows exactly what he is doing. The research also seems impeccable, though Redwood wears his learning lightly, with the facts about the various historical events and personages that N and Bertie investigate never less than convincing, enriching the narrative with titbits of gossip and a wealth of supportive detail that compels the necessary suspension of disbelief until he is ready to deliver a resolution that leaves you slightly gob smacked at the writer's audacity. And Redwood's prose is a delight, the work of a storyteller who has found his voice, a natural raconteur with a relaxed and agreeably self-mocking tone, the ability to effortlessly keep us hanging on his every word. It's ideal for the self-deluding and conceited, but ultimately harmless and wholly amiable N. Redwood never missing a trick, demonstrating a droll comic turn of phrase and sprinkling the text with in-jokes for the cognoscenti, as he wins over even the hardest hearted reader. The

author's wit and irreverence shine through, with many scenes that had me laughing out loud, as houses built on clay are toppled and sacred cows led to the slaughter, and bubbling away beneath the surface a Rabelaisian love of what, for want of a better word, I shall describe as smut.

There are niggles. For one thing, some loose ends are left dangling, such as the mystery of the Beckettesque characters who wander in and out of the text at various points, and the role of the time traveller/angel Moroni, who is busy reinventing history for his own amusement; while these rags, tags and tiddlywinks of invention are rewarding in their own right, adding zest to the text and keeping the reader off balance, they also tend to undermine the book's status as a self-contained work of fiction (as far as I can tell, this is not billed as Book One of the N Chronicles). More significantly, characterisation here pales in comparison to the giants who strode the pages of *Fisher of Devils*, with N and his cohorts often seeming little more than foils for the author's comic invention. They lack the compassion, the Miltonian grandeur, the redemptive quality of Redwood's Lucifer, so that I found it hard to care about them in the same way or ever feel that they were genuinely in peril, narrative tension arising not out of fear for the characters so much as from curiosity as to which rabbit Redwood would next pull out of his hat. But then, for this type of fiction, such considerations are minor. As far as I know nobody has ever dismissed Wodehouse on the grounds that Jeeves and Wooster were not realistic depictions of an English gentleman and his manservant, or that aunts are seldom the minatory ogres found in the environs of Blandings Castle and, genre trappings aside, Redwood is writing in the same vein of 'gentle' and atypically English humour, only with a dash of saucy seaside postcard panache bunged in for flavour. Overall it's an irresistible combination, and one which should delight those who want to cast their net a little wider than the next letter home from Discworld. •

Peter Tennant



Chung Mae is a dyslexic member of the people who invented printing, and the short, false artlessness of the sentences tell us that she is already operating at the edge of her ability. In the punning year of 2020, her one-television village is the last place in the world to go online. They manage to do so just as the technology is about to slip into obsolescence, replaced by 'Air', an all-pervading presence that will alter humanity. Now her nation's primitiveness is the very thing that ensures

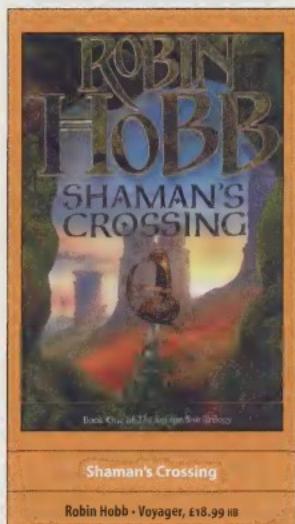
the jump. The corruption and poverty of Karzistan (another joke, nodding to Conrad's *Costaguana* – there is much humour here) ensure that it is ideally placed to be a test-bed for one of Air's competing formats. The resulting chaos does not help anyone, and some are even killed in the shock of it all. One such victim is old Mrs Tung, Mae's neighbour, who imprints Mae with her memories and personality, creating an internal ghost to haunt Mae for the rest of her days. Altered, Mae is cast adrift to continue her struggle for her village. The allegiances and friendships of her people drift and shift as the fear of change works upon them, for this is a novel of emotion. The battle between fear and love leak into our reality as we watch this version of our own media's atomized entertainments, and

the characters each take their chance to earn affection or, failing that, pity.

We're in a fantasy, have no doubt about that. It has a ghost, a talking dog, superpowers, and even a superfluous map at the beginning. But they are all rationalised, with only Mae's miraculous pregnancy pulling the reader out of the narrative of a brief moment. Ryman can be forgiven that, for the weave of the novel says that no one is perfect. The ending is subtly open ended – blink and you might miss it – but lingers afterwards, like the spirit of Mrs Tung, to puzzle us.

And how apt that *Air* is only now being published in Britain, a year after America – we're not so different from Mae's people after all. ■

Jim Steel



Shaman's Crossing is the first book in new series entitled 'The Soldier Son Trilogy' by Robin Hobb.

As the second son of a second son, Nevarre Burvelle's life is already mapped out for him – he is to become a soldier, specifically, a cavalry officer like his father, and his deeds will bring honour to his family name. Nevarre's father is a 'New Lord', a title awarded him by the king for his prowess in battle against the now defeated Plainsmen. The Plainsmen were such fearsome foes that Nevarre is handed over by his father to a warrior as part of his training. The training however is much more brutal than his father anticipated and Nevarre is eventually returned home near to death.

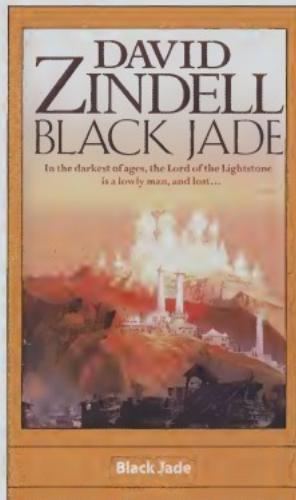
After a long period of recuperation, Nevarre eventually reaches the Old Thares and the Cavalla Academy to begin his training in earnest. It is here that Nevarre and his new friends learn the difference between 'Old' and 'New' nobles, and the politics that underpin Gernian society. As desperately as Nevarre wants to succeed, others want him to fail, and he soon realises that his training will be a stern test of his survival skills.

In Thares itself, Nevarre has an uncle and some cousins, in particular, a cousin called Epiny. This strange almost childlike young woman will have a profound effect on Nevarre, and will certainly cause him to question many of the things he's been bought up to believe.

Then there are the Specks – a dappled-skinned race of forest dwellers who have access to the last vestiges of magic in the land. The new frontier has reached their borders, and it is likely that Nevarre will be pitted against them when his training is complete. He's never actually seen a Speck, his knowledge of them being solely based on hearsay and rumour, so it is with fear and curiosity he encounters his first at a fair in Thares. This encounter has repercussions that will change the world as he knows it.

This is a 'Rite of Passage' based story, a theme extremely common in today's fantasy, but it's not at all as predictable as its commonality of theme suggests. Hobb creates likeable characters facing real, challenging situations. It's a little slow in places, but gathers pace as more and more elements of the plot are introduced and rounded out, and it soon becomes quite a compelling read. I haven't been keeping up with Hobb's books of late, but this certainly reminds me what a good storyteller she is, and I'm looking forward to further books in this series at least. *

Vikki Lee



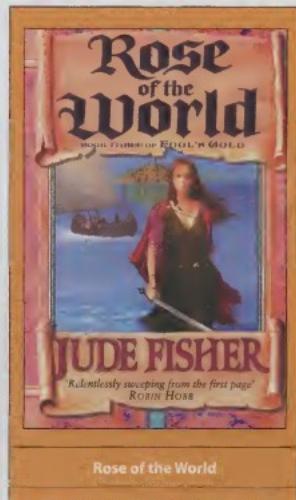
Black Jade

David Zindell - HarperCollins pb/hb, £14.99/£20

Some writers treat the epic fantastic genre not as something to be challenged but as an area to be mined and explored. Instead of commenting upon the weaknesses, they rebuild them in a new style; each author retains their individual voices and find different ways to express themselves within a seemingly staid form.

David Zindell's *Black Jade* is the third in the 'Lightstone Cycle' and it expands upon an already classic land, for we are in the heart of Fantasy in this series. Although the Lightstone has been lost to Morjin, Valashu continues his quest across Ea to find the Maitreya, the one person who may be able to challenge the fallen angel. His company discovers the path to the knowledge that they seek in the Way Rhymes, poems which need to be interpreted. Instead of relying upon the prophecy being misleading or half-fulfilled, he allows the company to play with semantics and find their own meanings.

Zindell allows for many paths, epiphanies and journeys towards the final goal, renewing the quest motif so central to the genre. Instead of merely moving from A to B, having a fight before regaining the lost artefact, Zindell allows the company to experience the joys and depressions of a long journey where not everything goes their way, they are often mental as well as physical. Rather than concentrating on the action, Zindell uses the thick description reminiscent of Tolkien and archaicisms to create his world whilst focusing upon the characters and the journey itself. It is as if the ending is almost irrelevant (though I suspect that this will fortunately not be the case). Thankfully lighter in tone than Tolkien or Robert Howard, this quartet shows that world and character building on



Rose of the World

Jude Fisher - Simon & Schuster pb, £11.99

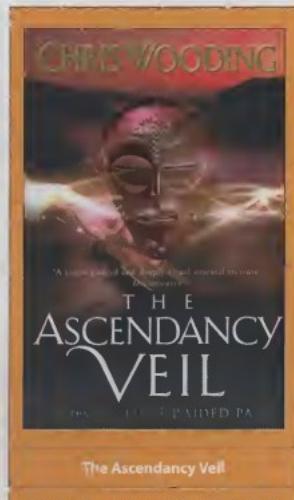
this scale can still be worth reading.

Jude Fisher's trilogy concludes with *The Rose of the World* and what marks this trilogy is its humanity and undercutting of fantasy's reliance upon magic and action. Throughout she has undercut the male control of the world, showing women to hold a more subtle power that subtly connects them to the land. In contrast to Zindell's leanings towards uplift for humanity, Fisher leans to the more feminine ways of re-establishing the world in contrast the male driven journey to the wastes which is a barren fight.

The world of Istria is expanded upon as the Norse men travel to the northern wastes, the Rosa Eldi is loose in the world, revitalising the lost religions and beliefs of the southern kingdoms. In the convergence of the worlds, Fisher finds a way of reconnecting its people with nature, as does Zindell. In contrast to Zindell, Fisher goes back to the sagas and uses the retold tale of valour and exploration with the concerns and expressions of a modern woman. Instead of relying upon the stock characters, she updates them with her own concerns, giving life to fantasyland.

Both authors have taken the essence of the form but have the bravery to explore the sources and techniques which established the subgenre. In their separate approaches, they manage to create highly individual and entertaining works. Though they create huge worlds and traverse them, there is always the sense of the individuals that live in them giving them life. These are books which take the recipe of heartland Fantasy with a pinch of very modern salt, looking to renew its wonder.

What often seems to be forgotten in Fantasy



The Ascendancy Veil

Chris Wooding - Gollancz pb/hb, £10.99/£17.99

is the sense that one needs to build worlds through words and imagery. Whilst the societies, language and creatures may signify foreign lands, some writers rarely seem to develop the images to draw the reader into the world. Both Zindell and Fisher express their worlds through language and the characters, allowing them to feed off each other. Chris Wooding's *The Ascendancy Veil* is a riot of strange and strong images which give the reader a sense of wonder at his worlds. The Red Ones continue their war against the Weavers, trying to restore the balance and keep Saramyr from tearing itself apart. Lucia must face up to her destiny whilst Kaiku descends into the demon pits to discover their secrets. Neither takes their sons on lightly but need to make sacrifices.

He has constructed a slightly askew Orientalist version of the Fantasyland that has developed definite anime undertones, especially in this final book, which add to their charm. Yet these are not cosy fantasies, there are moments of horror and darkness which comes from actions but also the lack of info dumping which leaves the reader asking for more. Wooding has written an enjoyable fantasy that deftly plays with gender politics and develops characters who are not necessarily likeable or charming but who invoke definite feeling in the reader.

What all these novels realise is that it is not only the world which invokes the fantastic, it is often how the characters interact with the world and the set pieces. If the tale is being retold, it needs voices to adapt and renew it, to bring it up to date with new concerns. These books show that there is a case of Fantasy is dead, long live Fantasy. *

Iain Emsley

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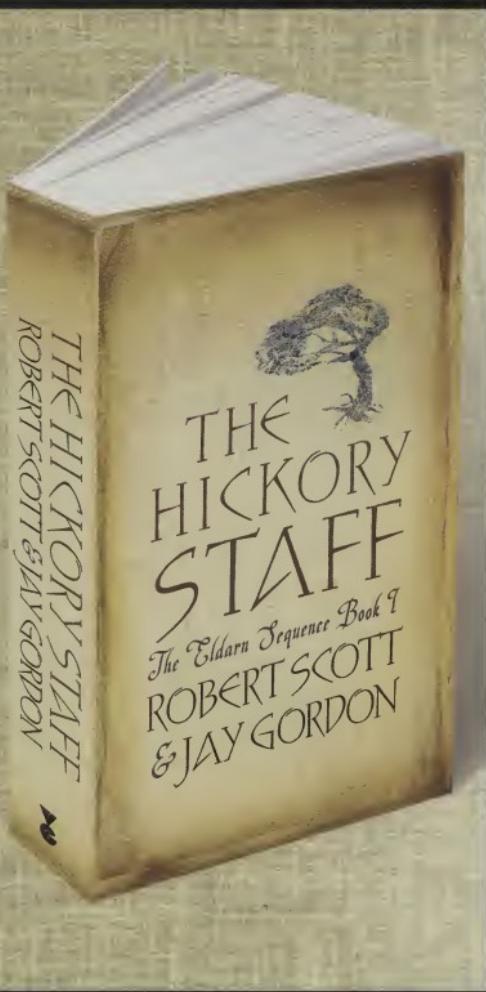
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